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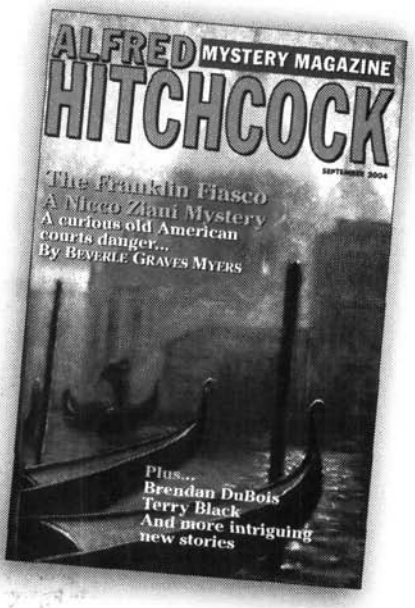

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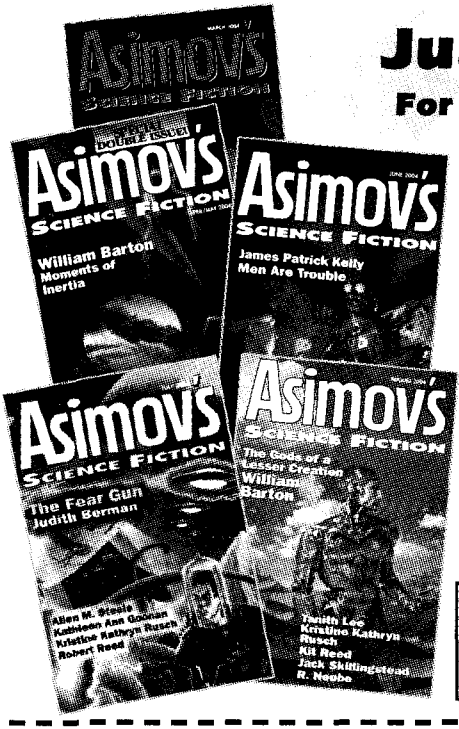

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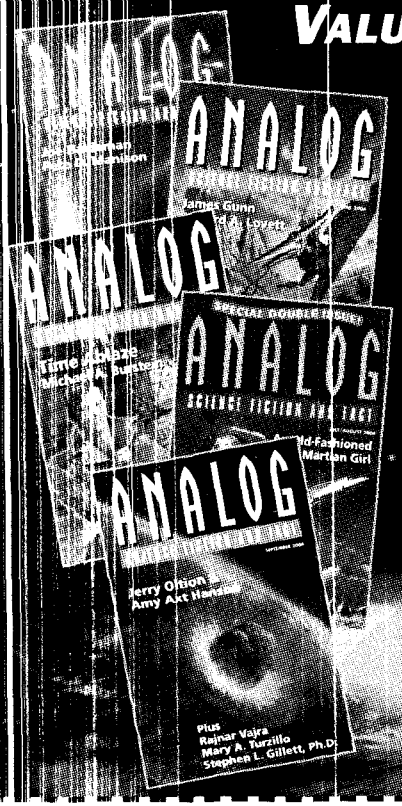

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Art by Mark Evans

HAND DELIVERY

by Edward D. Hoch

With the money we'd earned over the summer, Ives and I were finally able to launch our courier service from a tiny office at Broadway and 12th Street. We started running small ads in *The Wall Street Journal* and other business publications: *Stanton & Ives. Courier Service. Anything. Anywhere.* I figured that told the story.

My partner, Juliet Ives, didn't necessarily agree. "Shouldn't we make it *Anywhere on Earth*? What if they want us to go to the moon?"

I could see she was in one of her whimsical moods, ready to fill our dull morning hours with a senseless argument. "Ives, forget about it and come help me hang these pictures. We want this place to look like something when our clients start arriving."

"When do you think that'll be?" she grumbled, picking up the hammer to help me. The color photographs had been cut from travel posters and carefully framed. We had Hawaii, Rio, Cairo, and Moscow, conveying the illusion that we covered the world. Well, we had been to England, Cuba, Greece, and Nevada, which was a start.

©2004 by Edward D. Hoch

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EQMM has received a lot of feedback about Edward D. Hoch's Stanton and Ives series, which debuted in the magazine in 2002. A few readers have thought some of the subjects Mr. Hoch has chosen too sensational, but most have found the stories to be among his best—full of the energy and irreverence one would expect his youthful sleuths to provide. This time out, the duo take a trip to Italy, where they become enmeshed in a strange case of kidnapping. ¶

Ives was on a chair hammering a nail when our first client walked through the door. He was a well-dressed man in his forties carrying a package no bigger than a breadbox. His eyes went first to Ives's long legs and then to the travel photos before finally finding me by the desk. "Ah . . . Stanton and Ives?"

I smiled and held out my hand. "Walt Stanton. That's Juliet Ives on the chair."

She came down, removing the extra nail she'd been holding between her lips. "You've come to the right place. How can we help you?"

"I'm Professor Nathan Hardwick at Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons. We have a special problem, and my friend Tom Blacktree at Princeton suggested I contact you."

Ives's face lit up. "Professor Blacktree! He was our career counselor and we did some fund-raising for him last summer. We've just opened our office here."

"So I see." He glanced at the hammer she still held. "He spoke very highly of you both, said you'd done some courier work in the past."

"That we have," I assured him.

"There's so much red tape anymore, with all these terrorist alerts. This needs to be in Florence, Italy, tomorrow. A couple of firms I contacted just couldn't do it that fast." He set the package carefully on my desk.

"Florence," I repeated. "A lovely city, the city of Dante and the Medici. May I ask what is in the package?"

"A prosthesis, a mechanical hand. A surgeon in Florence is waiting for it."

"Aren't such things available in Europe?"

"Not like mine," he answered with a touch of pride. "The patient wanted the very best available. He's an Italian film star and money is no object."

"How did he lose his hand?" Ives wanted to know.

"That doesn't concern us. Your job is to deliver the prosthesis to Dr. Inzio Aprile in Florence tomorrow."

"You haven't asked our fee," Ives said, and quoted a price that was triple what we'd agreed on. "That includes transportation, of course."

"Which of you will be going?"

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"Both of us," she answered quickly, before I had a chance to respond.

"Very well. Will you bill me?"

"We give a ten-percent discount for prior payment."

He didn't blink an eye. "Very well. Draw up an invoice and I'll write you a check."

I collected my wits enough to say, "We need to see this prosthesis first. I don't want any surprises going through customs."

"Of course. I have already completed the necessary customs declarations and you should have no trouble. Here's a letter to Dr. Aprile. We're in touch by e-mail so I'll tell him you're on the way. I'd take it myself, but I have a full schedule this week. However, I hope to observe the surgery by closed-circuit television."

He slit open the top of the box and felt through the packing material to extract a carefully bubble-wrapped plastic likeness of a human hand. "It's the latest model, in the specific skin tone that Dr. Aprile requested. We use a color chart, like dentists replacing a tooth. These tubes and rods will be inside his forearm, enabling a certain amount of movement after training and rehabilitation. It won't replace the real thing, but it's a pretty good copy."

"It looks expensive," Ives commented.

"Believe me, it is. And there's a man in Italy who really needs it."

We flew overnight to Rome with Ives snuggling up to me in our First Class seats. "You didn't think I was going to let you see Florence without me, did you?"

"I expected as much when you quoted that outlandish price to Hardwick."

"He paid it, didn't he? The check is in our account."

"But I don't like leaving our office in the care of an answering machine. We'll have to think about hiring a secretary."

We changed planes in Rome early Tuesday morning and flew directly to the Vespucci airport about two and a half miles from Florence. The package was with us in the overhead rack, and we'd cleared customs with a minimum of delay. The last leg of the flight was uneventful. Florence wasn't at its best in November, with temperatures only in the fifties, or the teens on their Celsius scale, but at least it wasn't raining.

We took a taxi directly to the Hospital of Saint Alessandro, one of the city's largest. Just before noon we were ushered into the presence of Dr. Inzio Aprile, a soft-spoken man of quiet intelligence. He wore tinted glasses and a small white goatee. I guessed him to be in his fifties.

"Mr. Stanton, Miss Ives! It is a pleasure to meet you." He spoke perfect English with the slightest of accents. "Professor Hardwick e-mailed me with your arrival time. We have scheduled the

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surgery for later this afternoon." He gestured toward the package I was carrying. "Let me open it at once."

He carefully examined the prosthetic device and expressed satisfaction. "How did your patient lose his hand?" Ives asked.

"It was a terrible, terrible crime. The details have not yet been released to the press or public. Alfredo Beggs is one of our top movie stars, a handsome fellow, especially popular in action films. He is unknown in your country, though he has been learning English and hopes to broaden his horizons. A few weeks ago he was kidnapped from the set of his latest film, which is being shot on location north of here. The kidnappers demanded one million euros from his studio within twenty-four hours or they would start sending him back in pieces."

"My God!" Ives gasped. "You don't mean—"

Dr. Aprile nodded. "They sent back his left hand in a box. The studio paid the million euros at once and he was released. He was heavily sedated and the surgery had been skillfully performed, but as you can imagine, this prosthesis is essential to his career. Once it's in place and working well, we can release the full story to the press."

"There was no chance of reattaching the hand?"

The doctor shook his head. "It had been off too long, and it had not been packed in ice or preserved in any way."

"Have the kidnappers been apprehended?" I asked.

"Sadly, no. But the police claim to have several leads. Kidnapping for ransom is rare in your country, but I fear it is all too frequent here and in parts of Latin America."

I nodded, remembering reading about Aldo Moro, abducted and murdered in 1978, the year I was born. "Could we see your patient?" Ives asked. "I always like to meet handsome movie stars."

"I suppose so," he agreed. "He's somewhat sedated in preparation for the surgery, so he won't talk much. Follow me."

"Have you done this sort of operation before?"

"Not with one of Professor Hardwick's prostheses, but he'll be watching the surgery on video and communicating with us throughout. Come this way."

We followed him down the corridor to the elevators. On the third floor, a nurse in the white habit of the Sisters of Charity met us. "I am Sister Brenda," she said as Dr. Aprile introduced us. She seemed a mere girl, and spoke English perfectly. "You have the new hand, Doctor?"

"Right here. I thought he might want to see it before we put him under."

"Perhaps. He's only half-conscious now."

We followed them into a private room so full of flowers it looked like a wake. The man in the bed was indeed handsome, with a chiseled jaw and pale blue eyes that were now just barely open. A

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gauze bandage covered the right side of his head. "Here it is, Alfredo," Dr. Aprile said, in English, for our benefit, then repeated it in Italian.

Alfredo Beggs tried to smile, but it came hard. He raised his left arm, revealing a large white bandage the size of a boxing glove. "We'll have that off in a minute," the doctor said, and began to unwrap it.

Ives turned her head away as the last of the bandages came unwound, and it was only the doctor's gasp of astonishment that made her look back. My eyes had never left the scene, and I was as astonished as Aprile. The man's left hand was firmly in place, with only a thin red line encircling the wrist where it had been severed.

Sister Brenda crossed herself and fell to her knees.

Back in his office, Doctor Aprile looked at us and said, "I believe we have just witnessed a miracle."

"Sister Brenda certainly thought so," Ives commented. "What do you think, Stanton?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

After examining and manipulating the wrist, Aprile had ordered an immediate X-ray of the miraculously restored limb, and we were waiting with him for the result. "There can be no logical explanation," he assured us. "I was the first to see him when he was brought in. The hand had been completely severed, and I have X-rays to prove it." He picked up a folder from his desk and slid the rectangle of film into the spring holder of a light box. What we saw was certainly an arm, without a hand attached.

"Was any other surgeon treating him?"

"Certainly not. I looked in on him every day. I dressed the wound and kept it bandaged to prevent infection, though, as I said, the amputation had been skillfully performed. He was sedated much of the time, but seemed aware of what had happened to him."

"What about the bandage on his head?"

"He suffered an abrasion and a mild concussion at the time of the kidnapping. Nothing serious."

Sister Brenda entered with the new X-ray. "I knew you were anxious to see it."

"Thank you, Sister." He slipped it onto the light box that served as a viewing screen. "There you are! A perfectly normal wrist with no sign of surgery. The thing can only be a miracle."

"Did you X-ray the severed hand?"

"Why would we do that?"

"How did you know it was Beggs's?"

"It was the left hand. He was wearing a wedding ring. The studio immediately arranged for payment of the ransom and he was

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returned, minus his hand."

"What should we do now?" Ives asked. "Take back the prosthesis?"

"You'll have to. This was specially constructed as to size and skin color, based on a photograph of Beggs's right hand. I would have no other use for it."

"I think it wise if we remain here a few days," I told him. "I'd like to know the explanation for all this."

"Do as you like. I will get on the phone to Professor Hardwick and tell him what has transpired."

As we left his office and headed for the elevator, I saw Sister Brenda follow us out. "What about you?" I asked. "Do you really believe in this miracle?"

She smiled slightly. "Miracles are all around us. Only some are more obvious than others."

"There must be some explanation for this."

"Go find the Church of Orsanmichele. Ask for Padre Bruno and he will tell you about the severed hand."

It was nearly four when we left the hospital and headed for our hotel. As soon as we'd checked in, Ives was ready to go. "It's too early to eat anyway. Let's find that church she mentioned."

"Aren't you tired?"

"Come on," she urged. "We slept a little on the plane."

The Church of Orsanmichele was a curious square building three stories high with a flat roof, just two blocks from our hotel. "Are you sure this is the place?" I asked.

"That's what the guidebook says. It was originally a grain market, with two floors of storage above. When it became a church in the fourteenth century, those outside niches were adorned with statues of the patron saints of various merchants' guilds."

We entered through a door on the Via dei Calzaiuoli and found ourselves behind a huge marble tabernacle at the front of the church. Ives identified it as the altar of the Virgin Mary and I held her hand as we bent to examine the bas-relief base. A short middle-aged priest wearing a cassock and surplice appeared from somewhere to greet us. "We're looking for Padre Bruno," Ives said.

A gentle smile appeared on his face. "I am he, and I expect you have come to discuss wedding plans."

"No, no!" I quickly corrected him. "We are only tourists."

"Forgive me. You were holding hands and you wear no wedding rings. I only assumed—"

Ives took up the explanation. "Sister Brenda at the hospital said you could tell us about severed hands."

"Ah, the miracle! Come with me." He led us down a side aisle to a stained-glass window. "You see it commemorated here, one of the Church's pious legends. Long ago, in the fifth century, a beautiful

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woman is said to have kissed the hand of Pope Leo the first during Mass. Mortified at feeling desire for the woman, he ordered his servant to cut off the hand. The Blessed Virgin later restored it. Known as the Miracle of the Severed Hand, it is depicted here in stained glass."

Ives and I stared up at the scene. "Is this something Catholics believe?" I asked.

The smile was back. "The Church has many pious legends. We need not believe them all."

"If something like this were to happen today—"

"To the Pope?"

"No, to a movie actor."

"Then I might search for another explanation, short of the miraculous."

"Thank you, Padre," Ives told him. "You've been a great help."

Our hotel, the fancy Della Signoria, was in an excellent location for seeing the city—right by the Palazzo Vecchio and the entrance to the Corridoio Vasariano, which stretched out across the Arno River from the Uffizi Gallery, one of Italy's prime museums, to the Palazzo Pitti on the river's other bank. We spent some time at the museum and then ate dinner at the hotel. I was worn out from the flight and the day's events, but sleep did not come easily. When we were in bed together, I said, "That priest was funny, thinking we'd come there to get married."

"Not so funny, Stanton. Maybe we should think about it someday."

"If we got married, we'd be like Tommy and Tuppence," I told her.

She rolled over on top of me. "We'd never be like Tommy and Tuppence."

In the morning I phoned our client back in the States. He'd already heard from Dr. Aprile about the situation, of course, and was expecting we'd be on our way home. "We're sort of sceptical on the subject of miracles," I told him. "We'd like to hang around a day or two and get this sorted out. There may be another explanation."

"What other explanation could there be?" he asked.

"I don't know. With movie people, you always suspect some sort of publicity stunt."

"As I understand it, they're trying to keep the entire matter a secret. That doesn't sound like a publicity stunt."

"Let me see what I can find out today. We'll phone you in the morning."

"Aprile says he can't use the prosthesis, so you'll be bringing it back with you."

"Fine."

Over breakfast, Ives munched on a piece of toast and decided, "I've figured it out."

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"I'm all ears."

"This whole trip was a setup, a plot that Aprile and our client devised together. Aprile has hidden something in the prosthesis we'll take back. Drugs, diamonds, explosives—who knows?"

"I'm sure customs will search or X-ray it. No, I think the key to it lies in the kidnapping. If we find the kidnappers we should be able to determine if it's a publicity stunt or a smuggling operation or—"

"Or what?"

"Well, a miracle."

We went back to the hospital, just in time to find Dr. Aprile making his morning rounds. "Come in! It's time you had a proper meeting with Alfredo Beggs. He's fully awake and feeling much better."

The handsome young actor's bandages had been removed, and even the red circle around his left wrist was beginning to fade. He was sitting up in bed and greeted us with a handshake. "Dr. Aprile tells me you two flew my new hand across the ocean. I'm pleased to say I do not need it." His English was good, though thickly accented. I remembered the doctor telling us he was learning the language to broaden his horizons.

"You've had quite an experience," Ives said. "Can you tell us what happened?"

"I know so little. I was—what? drugged?—I was drugged most of the time."

"How did the kidnapping happen?" she wanted to know.

"This film, *Fistful of Fury,* is a remake of an Italian Western that starred your Clint Eastwood forty years ago." He smiled a bit. "The director, Antonio Goncourt, told me when the film was released, Beggs would be as big a name as Eastwood. We were filming in the countryside north of here and I was doing an especially tricky scene on horseback. The cameras were some distance away, and when we finished the scene a horse van was waiting on the road. I got in and at once I was chlor . . . chlor . . ."

"Chloroformed," Ives suggested.

"Yes. That was all I knew for the next few days."

"How many abductors were there?"

"I saw only two, the driver and the man who chloroformed me. Both were wearing bushy black hair which must have been wigs."

"What happened to your hand?" I asked.

"I was aware of great pain at some point, but I knew nothing more. I awakened here in the hospital, and Dr. Aprile told me they'd cut off my left hand."

I turned to the doctor. "Did anyone examine the amputation besides yourself?"

"Many people. He was left in a stolen car in the hospital parking lot, and the location was phoned to police. They rushed him into

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our emergency room where the residents and nurses on duty all saw him. I was not summoned until a few hours later. As soon as I observed the condition of the stump and realized the severed hand could not be reattached, I decided surgery might be possible within a few weeks. That was when I alerted Professor Hardwick in America."

"But you didn't wait that long."

Aprile sighed. "The studio, they have a large investment. And the insurance company was anxious for filming to resume. It had to be done as soon as possible, so he could begin rehabilitation. Money, always money!"

Ives asked a question. "Are you a religious man, Signore Beggs?"

He smiled. "All Italians are religious, even those of us who do not attend Mass. It is the country of the Pope, no? I pray to the Virgin for a miracle and she performs one."

We were interrupted by the arrival of a slim blond woman some years younger than Beggs. Dr. Aprile immediately welcomed her with a friendly hug. "Sophia, Alfredo is whole again!"

"No thanks to you," she murmured, and then turned to us. "And these beautiful people are—?"

"Juliet Ives and Walt Stanton," I told her. "We're the couriers who flew the prosthesis over from America. An unnecessary journey, as it turned out."

"Sophia is our patient's wife," Dr. Aprile announced, though I'd already gathered as much.

She bent to the bed and kissed his cheek, then inspected his left hand. "It's good as new! We'll have to get your wedding ring back."

But the actor shook his head. "I'll never wear it again. I told them to toss it down the incinerator along with my hand."

"Don't the police need the hand as evidence?" Ives wondered.

"They have photographs," Aprile explained. "You could hardly expect them to keep the hand itself in their file. We kept it until Alfredo was freed, of course, in the event it could have been reattached."

I decided it was time to offer our services. "Ives and I have had some experience in these matters."

"Kidnapping?" Sophia Beggs asked.

"No, just criminal things. We've been able to help the police on a number of occasions." Ives gave me a look, cautioning me not to overdo it, but I kept on. "Would it be possible to speak with your director, Signore Beggs?"

"Goncourt? I suppose so. I doubt if he'll be able to help us much. I'll call him if you wish."

"Do it, Alfredo," his wife urged. "The police are getting nowhere."

He called his director from the bedside phone and they spoke in excited Italian for several minutes. When he'd hung up, Beggs said, "He can see you tomorrow morning at ten. He has an office

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here in Florence while he's shooting the film. I'll give you the address."

"Just how was the ransom payment made?" I asked.

The actor shook his head. "You will have to get all that from Goncourt. I am just happy to be alive." He added, "In one piece," glancing at his left hand.

Sophia Beggs said, "We plan to donate one million euros to the Church of Orsanmichele. It has the altar of the Virgin Mary and the stained-glass window commemorating the miracle of the severed hand."

"We saw it yesterday," Ives told them. "Sister Brenda told us about it."

The actor nodded. "This way the Virgin will receive as much as the kidnappers."

Leaving the hospital a bit later, Ives said, "This is the strangest thing we've ever been involved in, Stanton. Can you imagine what the press will do with this story when they get it?"

"Miracles make great headlines," I agreed.

We spent the afternoon touring some of the city's museums, watching adolescent girls titter before Michelangelo's giant statue of David at the Academy of Art, feeling the power of Cellini's Perseus holding aloft the head of Medusa. "It's quite a city," Ives decided. "All this and a miracle, too."

"We'll see about that in the morning."

Antonio Goncourt met us in his office at ten. The first thing I noticed about him was his bare feet. He was wearing a red plaid shirt and dark pants, and a pair of sandals sat on the carpet next to his desk. In his fifties, Goncourt had long graying hair and a way of looking at us through his horn-rimmed glasses as if he were framing the next scene of his film. "Sit down," he said, friendly but precise. His perfect English didn't surprise me, since he'd lived much of his life in America. "This is about Alfredo and the kidnapping?"

"It is," I told him.

"Are you press? We are not yet ready to issue a statement."

"No press." I went on to explain our courier duties and the meeting with Dr. Aprile at the hospital.

"Alfredo told me you were there with him. How does he look? How is the hand?"

"Fine. His bandages are off and Aprile hopes to release him soon."

"Thank the Lord! I have a movie to make."

"Suppose you tell us about it," Ives suggested. "Right from the day of the kidnapping."

"I was shooting a scene near the end of the film. Alfredo's character, Lambezzi, is an adventurer in the James Bond mode, only in the American West of a century ago. He has many encounters with

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ladies. This is a part Alfredo has played often."

"Can we see the scene?" I asked. "Do you have dailies or whatever they're called here?"

He seemed to hesitate, then apparently decided to cooperate. "Certainly. They're very rough and this scene is silent. The sound effects and score are laid in afterward."

He led us into an adjoining room that had a movie screen and a pair of projectors. "Some directors use digital HD instead of dailies because it's cheaper, but I find you need dailies to accurately judge color and lighting. Take your seats and I'll turn it on. I was studying the scene myself earlier."

The seats were merely a double row of metal chairs but they were sufficient for our purpose. The screen flickered into life and we saw an outdoor closeup of Alfredo Beggs in Western garb, kissing a young woman. Then he slipped on his gloves, mounted a handsome chestnut horse, and rode off quickly. "The villain is coming," Goncourt explained. "We'll insert an establishing shot later."

Next was a long shot of a white truck moving along the road at the top of the hill. "That's just the catering girl leaving," the director explained. "This was right after lunch. We'll cut that out." Then we saw the star riding away from the camera, under some trees. Suddenly he reached up to grab a low-hanging branch, pulling himself out of the saddle while the horse galloped on. A moment later, the villain's horse rode out of the foreground, following the same path. Beggs dropped down on him and they fell to the ground together. The scene ended. There was nothing more.

"Then what happened?" Ives asked.

"We had a horse van up there to bring them back. The kidnappers overpowered our driver and took his place in the van. They were only after Beggs. Gus Marchand and the horses were left behind. They took Alfredo, drove about a mile down the road to another vehicle, then abandoned the van and escaped with their victim. Right through the security guards, somehow."

"Who's Marchand?"

"The actor playing the villain."

"How did the ransom demand arrive?"

"Someone called my private cell-phone number as soon as they had him, before we could report it to the police. They wanted a million euros within twenty-four hours or they'd send him back a piece at a time."

"What did you do?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. I waited for them to call again with delivery instructions. When they did, I tried to bargain with them. They just hung up. A few hours later a package was delivered to my office. It was a box with—with Alfredo's severed hand inside."

"How many people know your cell-phone number?" I asked.

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"Over a hundred. I couldn't begin to tell you every one."

"Go on. How was the money paid?"

"They told me to deliver it in a suitcase to the large park at the Villa Demidoff. It's about eight miles outside the city. The old place itself is all but gone, but the park remains. I had to deliver the money myself, alone, and leave it beneath a huge statue of Appenino in the park."

"Did you alert the police?" Ives wanted to know.

The director shook his head. "I was afraid of what they'd do to him. Once the money had been paid, we reported it, of course. The news media know he was kidnapped and later released, but we haven't told them about the hand."

"With so many people knowing about it, the truth is sure to come out."

"I suppose so," he admitted.

"Was the set open to the public?"

"Far from it. This is untended park land, sparse and sandy like portions of your American West. We had permission to block off the approaches to our set. I couldn't have a modern automobile drive by in the background while I was filming a period Western."

"Then it would seem the kidnappers were persons associated with the production. How many people were on the set when it happened?"

"Fifty or sixty. I could show you a list of them if you'd like."

Ives and I glanced over the sheets he handed us. They were his personal copy, in English, but the names meant nothing to us. Gaffers, grips, best boys, makeup, lighting, sound technicians, hair stylist, cinematographer, actors, horse wranglers, stunt men, drivers, script girl, director, security guards. The list seemed endless, but a quick count showed just fifty-eight names. "Are there always this many people involved?" I asked.

"In the studio there could be twice as many. Often the producers and screenwriters drop by. And for indoors we need more lighting technicians. That's why I like to shoot on location as much as possible. Keep that list if you want. I have another copy."

I folded it and slipped it into my pocket. "Do you have any explanation for this miracle of the hand?"

He shrugged. "My star is whole again. That's what matters."

"So where are we?" Ives asked as we left the building.

"Nowhere, until we get a line on the kidnappers."

She thought about that. "Maybe we're tackling this backwards. Perhaps if we figured out the miracle, we'd know the kidnappers."

"Want to have a try at that?" I asked as we walked toward the river. It was a sunny day and the autumn warmth had returned to the city.

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She took up the challenge. "All right. There are only two possibilities. Either it was a miracle or there is some rational explanation. I think we can rule out a miracle. Even if we accepted the Pope Leo legend, Alfredo Beggs is no Pope."

"Granted."

"Therefore we're looking for a rational explanation. We have several witnesses to the fact that Beggs was missing his left hand when he arrived at the hospital, yet it had been restored when we saw him on Tuesday. Could there have been some sort of secret surgery? No, because the X-rays would have revealed that. On Monday, Beggs had no left hand. On Tuesday he had one, good as new. Ergo, the man we saw on Tuesday was not Alfredo Beggs."

"A twin brother?" I smiled at the idea. "I'm sure someone would have known about him."

Ives was exasperated. "We're talking about the movie business! Leading actors may not have twin brothers, but they do have doubles."

"But his wife came to see him. She knew him!" I felt her analysis was a little bit off, but it took me a moment to twist it into shape. "Come on!" I decided suddenly. "We're going back to Antonio Goncourt's office."

The director gave us a quizzical smile as we reentered his office. "I was just leaving. Dr. Aprile phoned to say he's releasing Alfredo this afternoon. We'll resume shooting in the morning."

"Don't you feel he needs more of a recuperation period after what he's been through?"

He glanced from my face to Ives's, wondering what was up. "Are you trying to tell me something?"

"Nothing you don't already know. Ives came up with an interesting idea, that the man we met at the hospital isn't Beggs at all."

"I can assure you he is. We can identify his fingerprints if you doubt it."

"I don't doubt it. I agree that the man in the hospital is Beggs. But the man who was kidnapped and mutilated was his double."

His expression never changed. "On what do you base this whimsy of yours?"

"The wedding ring on that severed hand."

For the first time the director seemed unsure of himself. "The ring—?"

"Beggs is playing a James Bond type of Western hero, with plenty of women. A character like that doesn't wear a wedding ring, especially not in a period Western set a century ago. We saw him put on his gloves, and the scene shifted to a long shot of him on horseback, grabbing a tree limb to lift himself out of the saddle, and then drop down on the pursuing villain. That scene was where the double took over. It's the sort of shot that cried out for a stunt

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man. Since he was wearing gloves, the stunt man didn't need to remove his wedding ring. He was kept sedated from the moment of his kidnapping, so he couldn't tell them they had the wrong man. They probably wouldn't have believed him anyway."

Ives had been won over to my explanation and added to it. "Once the stunt man was freed, you didn't want to admit in public that the victim hadn't been Beggs. They might try to kidnap him again or otherwise harm him. So you substituted the real actor for the stunt-man double in the dead of night, probably with the aid of Dr. Aprile or someone else on the staff."

"I don't think Aprile was involved," I said. "But someone at the hospital obviously knew about it. Where is the stunt man now?"

"I know nothing of this," Goncourt told us.

"Come now, the time for bluffing is over. I have your list of fifty-eight people who were on location the day of the kidnapping. Every one of those people—lighting, makeup, script girl—all had to know it was Beggs's double that was in that scene. Do we need to question them? Do I need to contact each of these six stunt men until I find one who's missing a left hand?"

The director sighed, giving up the battle. "His name is Ruddy Palochino. He's in another room, on the fifth floor of the hospital."

"And Dr. Aprile didn't know about it?"

"No. Too many people knew about it already. We bribed two nurses on the night staff to let us make the switch. But how did you know Aprile wasn't involved?"

"Because he wanted us to take back the prosthesis. If he'd known there was a patient in the hospital who could double for Alfredo Beggs, probably with the same size hand and skin coloration, surely he would have tried to fit him with it."

"The two men could be brothers," Goncourt said. "With that bandage on his head, even the nurses thought it was Beggs. They were asking him for his autograph, but he pretended to be too doped up to sign anything."

"What did he tell you about the kidnapping?"

"Precious little. Two men grabbed him, wearing wigs. He was unconscious most of the time after that. Once he came half-awake while they were moving him and thought he smelled pizza. That was all he remembered, except for the vague pain after they severed his hand."

"Surely the truth will get out, with so many people knowing it," Ives argued.

"Oh, it will be fodder for the tabloids, without doubt. But I've come to believe there's no such thing as bad publicity in the entertainment business. No matter what they print, a certain segment of the public will still believe it was a miracle."

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"Will you issue an official statement about the stunt man's injury?"

A shrug. "Perhaps not. Our star is back, released by the kidnappers, and we resume shooting on *Fistful of Fury* tomorrow. Let the press dig for their own story."

"We'd like to visit the set if we may," I said.

"What for?"

"To identify the kidnappers, of course."

I telephoned Dr. Aprile from our hotel and told him he might want to see if the prosthesis could be used on a patient named Ruddy Palochino on the fifth floor. He didn't ask questions, but promised to check on it at once. An hour later he phoned back, catching us as we were going out for dinner. "It is amazing!" he told me. "The size and skin tones are a perfect match. I've scheduled the surgery for Saturday."

I phoned our client again and told him there was a use for the hand after all. "We have to wind up a few things here, but I hope to fly home Saturday night."

Over dinner, Ives asked, "Do you really think we can go out there tomorrow and find the kidnappers just like that?"

"I'm sure of it."

She shook her head as if to clear it. "I must be missing something."

The following morning we rented a car and arrived on the set about ten miles north of Florence, after being delayed by a pair of security guards until Goncourt was contacted by cell phone and arranged for our safe passage. The director was deep in conversation with Beggs and his attractive blond costar, busy arranging things for the scene he would shoot that afternoon.

Finally he broke free to speak with us. "The producers are here today, and we have extra police presence in addition to our own security. I had to admit some of the press, too. They want to interview Alfredo about the kidnapping."

"Have they heard about the hand yet?"

"Not from me. His wrist is still a bit red where I scratched the skin. I felt that even a miracle couldn't be without some visible trace."

When Goncourt hurried off to check camera angles, Ives turned to me. "This whole place is like a wonderland. Did he really think people would believe in a miracle over a more rational explanation?"

"Dr. Aprile seemed to believe it. Sister Brenda certainly did, when she sent us to see that stained-glass window." By that time it was almost noon and the catering truck had arrived in the parking lot. "Come on," I told her. "I'll buy you lunch."

"I thought we were here to catch some kidnappers."

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"All in good time." I led her toward the truck where a few of the carpenters and technicians were already lining up. Behind us, I caught a glimpse of Goncourt himself on the camera boom, riding it up for a better view.

"I'm waiting," Ives said as the catering girl handed her a Coke and a slice of pizza.

I helped myself to one, too. "There were fifty-eight people on location the day of the kidnapping. Remember, we looked over Goncourt's list and I remarked that every one of them had to know it was Beggs's double playing that scene. The security guards swore that no one had gotten past them, yet not only was the man kidnapped but he was spirited away from this location set without being seen. How was that possible? Was there someone who came here that wasn't part of the cast or crew, someone who wouldn't have known that the man on horseback was a double for Alfredo Beggs?"

Ives realized the truth in that instant. "The odor of pizza! It's what the kidnapped man remembered smelling!"

"Exactly." I locked my hand around the catering girl's right wrist, and when her left hand came up with a carving knife, Ives grabbed that one, too. We work great as a team.

The catering girl's name was Rita Salva, and for the first two hours she denied any knowledge of the kidnapping. It wasn't until police searched the interior storage space of the catering truck and found a broken spur from the stunt man's cowboy boot that she broke down and confessed. Her brother and a medical student friend of his had concocted the scheme and carried it out without realizing they were kidnapping the wrong man. She'd smuggled them onto the set in the catering truck's storage space, dropped them off, then fed the cast and crew while the two men overpowered the driver of the horse van. They chloroformed the stunt man, Palochino, and drove off to a rendezvous with the catering truck, transferring their unconscious prisoner to the storage space where they also hid until the truck was safely past the security guards.

It was the medical student who'd cut off Palochino's hand. He and Rita Salva's brother were apprehended that evening with the ransom money still in their possession.

Ives and I stayed over in Florence Saturday. We finally met with Ruddy Palochino shortly before surgery to attach the prosthetic hand. When Dr. Aprile told us later that the operation was a success, I felt a certain pride in the part we'd played.

Flying home that night, Ives lifted her head from my shoulder. "You know, we solved a mystery and there wasn't even a murder! Everyone is still alive."

"Those are the kind I like best." ●

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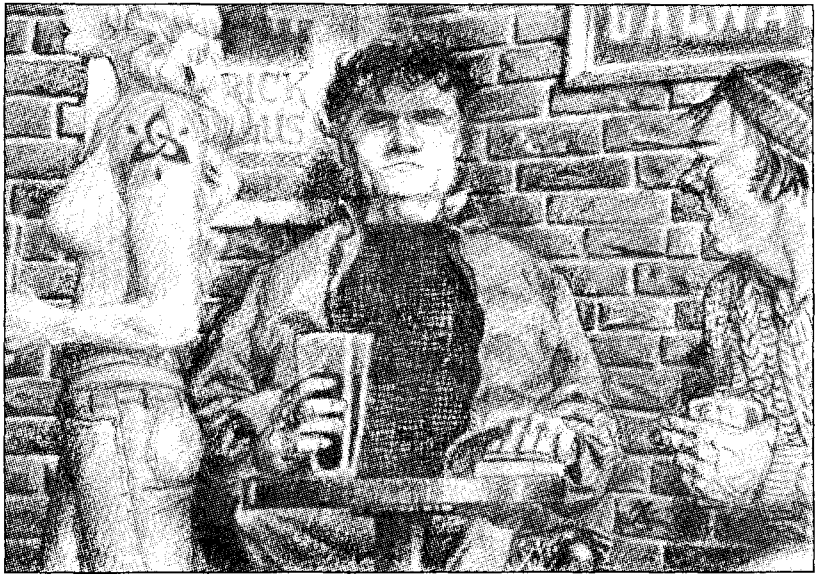

Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

Losing My Religion

by Ken Bruen

You want to know how Ireland is?
How it's been since the Celtic tiger died?
The bad death

I was sitting in a pub, Saturday afternoon, England had just beat the Aussies in the Rugby World Cup. The Brits were going to be crowing for the foreseeable future. I'd a nice buzz building, pint of Guinness with Jameson back. My third . . . Of both.

A guy slipped onto the stool beside me. My cigs, the coffin nailed Major, were on the counter, Zippo atop. Keep your vices where you can see them. He ordered a *glass* of Guinness, annoyed the barman, counting out a mess of small change.

Never annoy the barman.

Rule of prey.

I knew this half-measure merchant, think he went to school with me or something. He gave me a slight nod and I acknowledged it. Not too friendly; I was mellow but not yet stupid. We stared at the widescreen TV. . . . Sky News, all of it woesome.

Top story was the child killers trial in England. Followed by the Unionists ballyragging Sinn Fein.

The barman, cruising, remarked

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"Same old."

The guy beside me went

"Excuse me."

Mannerly, quiet, like that, I go

"Yeah?"

Put some edge in there, he asks

"Got a pen?"

I reached in my jacket, found my Cross, handed it over. He examined the gold finish, said

"Nice pen."

Then he produced a betting docket, turned it over, wrote something, handed me the pen back. A few moments passed, then he got off the stool, said

"Going to the jacks."

AND

Slid the docket to me. I waited till he went into the toilet then I looked

"I hate to bother you
but can I have the loan
of ten euro?"

Had the makings of a poem there.

I took out my wallet, laid a ten under his glass. He returned, took a large swig of his drink, asked

"What are you having?"

I gave him the look, said

"Ten wouldn't cover it."

He nodded, took the money, and took off.

That's how Ireland is.

I went back to dreaming about Donna Tartt. I'm nuts about her. No fooling around, she starts my engine. Sure, I read *The Secret History.*

Who didn't?

Ten years till she wrote the next, what was she doing . . . reading her reviews?

And where's the movie?

I saw an interview with her, she had a dog in her arms.

I've dated some dogs in my time.

She loves Paris, I figure I could get a gra for it. The truth is, I'm heading Stateside, I've, like, had it with the weather here. Pourin' down, day in, day out. And it is personal, that beggar is out to drown you. You look out the window, there's a patch of clear sky, so you think

"Uh-huh."

Ken Bruen's "breakout" novel, *The Guards,* was his first crime fiction published in the U.S., but he has had a following in his native Ireland and in England for a number of years. *The Guards* earned a nomination for the Edgar Allan Poe Award for best novel from the MWA, and the book was roundly praised in U.S. reviews: e.g. "original, grimly hilarious, and gloriously Irish" *(The Washington Post),* and "brilliant, lyrical, and deeply moving" *(Denver Post).* ✝

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Delighted not to have to don the rain gear. You head out, no backup, hit Shop Street and the heavens open. Two minutes and you're drenched, lashes with ferocity, gets in the space at the collar, dribbles down your back. I hate that.

Teeming.

They got the word exclusively for Ireland. Don't buy into that blarney soft Irish weather. That sucker is mean.

I have a plan. You heading for America, they appreciate forward planning. I like to do a little coke, nothing major, not like I have a Jones or anything. No monkey on my back, baby. I just know Donna wouldn't hang with some . . . like . . . dependent dude. What I like is the icy drip down your throat, and then, boom, your brain, like neon. There's a Dublin dealer living in a luxury pad down at Spanish Arch, Donny the Doper. Put that on a shingle, hang it out there.

He doesn't advertise.

No need.

It's a word-of-mouth business. The guards leave him be, he's got some juice. Saturdays, I'll drop by, score some quality. I amuse him, he usually offers me a drink, goes

"What's the rush?"

Loves to pun, a fun guy, so I say

"Sure, I'll go a cold one."

Tosses me a can of Special, he fixes me with those hard-ass eyes, asks

"Dylan, that's, like, your real name?"

I spell it . . . D-I-L-L-O-N.

He stares at me so I tell him

"It's an old Galway name."

He puts a line down, rolls a fifty-euro note, offers me first hit. I do the line. You hear the spiel that dealers don't sample the merchandise?

Dream on.

It's almost like a ritual, he gets up, the snow cranking in his blood, puts on Bruce, "American Skin." That opening haunting melody, then the hook

"41 shots."

Stirs up such yearning in me. What's that about? Damned if I know . . . or care. Then, next track, "Tom Joad."

I've finished the Special, tossed the can, and he gives me another. Nose candy, you can sink brews all night; he asks

"Favourite song?"

I can play, go

"Like ever?"

"Yeah, sure."

"No contest, 'Losing My Religion.'"

He always frowns, not sure if I'm putting him on . . . says

"R.E.M.?"

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I nod, take a long draught, then
"Song speaks to me."
I let him digest that till he laughs, exclaims
"You're kidding me?"
Shake my head, say
"Straight up, I hear that track, I'm in hog heaven."
"Why?"
I debate telling him the truth; I could shine him on but he's done some more lines so I go for it, say
"It's like the story of my life . . . 'me in the corner.' . . . The citizens have kept me there all my miserable life."
I'm on my feet, rage writ large. The whole clusterfest—School, calling me a retard. My mother running off when I was, like, ten, my old man pulling off his belt, whisky in his gullet, beating me within an inch of my life.
I lost it for a bit.
Happens.
I go back, I think of the past, I blank out, not for too long, a few minutes, then I'm okay. Donny looks concerned, near touches me, asks
"You all right, man?"
"Sure, no big thing."
He's not buying it, says
"You were gone, man, like you had a seizure or something, you get fits or what?"
That's when I head, get my score, get out of there.
Couple of months back, I was having a late night. I'd been washing dishes in the Great Southern, a headwaiter busting my chops. Got my pay, feeling the old rage, wanting to off somebody. Hadn't had a drink for, I don't know, going on two weeks. Just washing them pots every night. Not like a permanent gig. The hotel had reopened and Galway's upper class had a function on a nightly basis—
You didn't think the Irish had royalty? Us being fierce Republicans and all.
What a crock.
We worship money, the new heroes
Developers
Boy bands
Entrepreneurs
People like me, we're invisible. They don't see us. We could be non-nationals we're so far down the food chain. Bottom feeders.
There's a pub on the docks, my favourite. I read some crime fiction a few years back, a guy called Lawrence Block, he calls those pubs . . . *buckets of blood.*
Fits.
No social drinkers there. Hard booze and harder clientele. The

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dockers. No longer working, the docks being *developed.* Following them, you get the Tinkers, cops, oh yeah, and guys like me, the grey area. Get in there just before closing, Official closing, that is.

Look down.

Midnight on, no one gets in . . . or out. I know the guy riding the stick. Sees me, draws me a pint of black, lets it settle like, for five, and shoots me a large Jameson. I get the other side of that and chill.

'Bout two . . . the band kick in.

Man, they cook, start with jigs and reels, get the joint hopping. I usually have a corner, my back to the wall, pints and Jameson before me, Zippo riding point on the Major. You could put your wallet on the table, no one would mess with it, know why?

'Cos I'm old Galway.

A dying breed, we tend to mind our own, and this is the last place it counts for something. That other gang, the new Ireland, up in the flash hotels, they'd steal your eye tooth, smile behind their Tenerife tan as they robbed you blind.

I never know how the night will pan out. Odd times, and I stress the odd, I'll get a woman, out in the yard, up against the empty crates, bang her senseless.

Don't mean nothing.

I'm saving the best for Donna.

That night, a Russki was on my left, washed up off some tramp steamer, jumped ship, got a medical card, and settled in. Went by the handle *Igor.*

Original, huh?

He'd bought me a Jameson earlier so I wasn't pushed about his company. A girl got up on stage, how it goes, open microphone, she launched into

"The Fields of Athenry."

She'd a strong sweet voice, with an edge of longing in there, my favourite type, Emmylou Harris with too many cigs behind it. Igor is weeping, pulls out a flask, vodka, takes a lethal wallop then a mouthful of Guinness, he's nearly a native, goes

"Iss so sad."

I'm cranking the Zippo, ask

"You know the song?"

"I know sadness."

Wipes his sniffles and the girl is doing "Misguided Angel."

Cowboy Junkies.

He looks at me, leans in, says

"I got a weapon."

I'm cool; if he's threatening me, and you never know with vodka, he'll be gone nine ways to Sunday before he can pull it. I ask

"What kind?"

Like I give a rat's, he whispers

"Walther PK."

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Pronounces it 'Valther.' I'm thinking, serious weight. He looks around, says

"One hundred euro, I can give."

I give him eighty and he slips me the weapon in an oilcloth. I ask

"Ammo?"

"Please?"

"Bullets."

"Oh . . . Is loaded."

I put it in the right pocket of my wax jacket. Had that for twenty years, since my old man dropped dead in the kitchen. He was wearing the jacket, I peeled it off him, spat in his face, then called the ambulance.

My estate.

That and the leather belt, a heavy buckle with the Claddagh emblem, I wear it all the time.

When I went for a pee, the girl singer was at the bar, having a rum and black. Gave me a smile so I said

"You're really good."

She was pleased, said

"You're Dillon."

"How do you know?"

A radiant smile, then

"Everyone knows you."

True enough. I nodded at her drink, asked

"Go another?"

"Love to."

Got that squared away and she threw it back like a good un, said

"I'd better get back, I've two more songs to do."

Paused, then

"You got a request?"

What the hell, I went

"'Losing My Religion.'"

She was moving towards the stage. Said

"Never heard of it."

Fourth of July, American Independence Day, I put two rounds in Donny's face. I'd let him do a few lines so he went on a high. Cleaned out his cash, serious wedge and a bag of the blow.

I have my new ID. . . . My bag packed and an Aer Lingus flight at nine from Shannon; I've never flown but I sure have been high. I'm wearing my father's belt, the wax coat, and figure, what the hell, one more time, hit the speakers, stand at the door, my hand on the lock, Stipe going

"That's me in the corner." ●

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SILICON VALLEY SERENADE

by John A. Miller

John A. Miller's unlicensed private eye, like another well-known character in mystery fiction who hails from the same geographic area, is given no name in the stories in which he appears. But unlike Bill Pronzini's famous "Nameless," Mr. Miller's character is forced to remain on the fringes of P.I. work because he's a white-collar ex-con. A habitué of a local bar, he's called out on a case this time by a former buddy from his days as a practicing attorney.

"Hey, um, uh . . ." Barton Adams sat behind his antique British partner's desk and pointed at me as I walked by his office door.

"William," I said helpfully, "William Smith." I stopped and smiled as if I were so clueless as to think that his apparent inability to remember my name was nothing more than an amusing idiosyncrasy. Of course, William Smith was not, in fact, my name, but that's beside the point.

"Yeah, William," Barton said, his tone of voice implying that this conversation had already lasted longer than he had hoped it would. "Whatever." In addition to the many other things about him that annoyed me, Barton appeared to be one of those lucky few whom the gods had anointed as an infant. Young, good-looking, I mean *really* good-looking, Harvard undergrad and Dartmouth MBA, engaged to the boss's daughter, pulling down somewhere between two and four hundred big ones a year—it was enough to make you overlook the fact that he was also a world-class jerk. Almost. "Yeah, whatever," he repeated dismissively, waving a hand again as if shooing a fly away. "Bring me a latte and an almond biscotti." He looked at me briefly, just long enough to make sure I was listening, and then looked back down at the report he had been reading. "Nonfat milk and no foam on top."

I had been employed as an administrative assistant at Pan-Pacific Equity Partners in Palo Alto for eight long days. Not too many years ago I would have been more aptly, which is to say less politically correctly, described as the office boy, my days filled with

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pulling espressos, relieving Dolores, the receptionist, when she took her breaks, and running errands for everyone at the firm. Now, standing at the stainless-steel and brass espresso machine (a nicer one, by the way, than most coffee shops have) steaming nonfat milk for Barton's latte, I could not help but be struck anew by the elastic nature of time. I mean, the eight days I'd been there already seemed like eight years. I reminded myself, not for the first time that day, to tell my old friend and Stanford classmate Roscoe Jackson, the man responsible for this situation, just what I thought of his client list.

"You'd be a lot easier to do business with if you kept your telephone turned on, or, failing that, if you occasionally checked your messages." Roscoe Jackson was trying hard to look and sound irritated, but I could tell that his heart wasn't in it. An important partner in an influential San Francisco law firm, he had been trying without success to reach me for a couple of days before finding me at O'Mahoney's, an Irish pub out in the Sunset District. We were sitting in his corner office on the thirtieth floor of the Transamerica Pyramid discussing my shortcomings as a freelance, unlicensed investigator.

"Why are your windows so dirty?" I asked, genuinely curious—the windows really *were* filthy—although I figured it was a good way to get him off the question of why I never answered my telephone. "The kind of rent your law firm must pay, you'd think the landlord could at least keep the windows clean."

He sighed, smart enough to recognize my ploy, but also obviously unhappy about the state of his windows. "A couple of peregrine falcons have built a nest on a ledge three floors up, and the city's environmental-affairs office is afraid that the window-washing platform going up and down might cause them to abandon it. So," he shrugged with resignation, "until the hatchlings fly away we're stuck with dirty windows." He paused a second, trying to get his train of thought back on track. "I have a client, a relatively small but extremely successful venture-capital firm with offices in Palo Alto, who might be able to utilize your, um, services."

I nodded but kept my mouth shut, something my own defense counsel had advised me to do at my trial and subsequent sentencing hearing some years ago. In not taking his advice at the time I learned a valuable lesson, one reinforced a number of times in the three years I consequently spent at Folsom State Prison.

"The firm was started by Mason Garrett," Roscoe continued, "and although he has four partners, they're equal in name only—Mason has retained effective control over the business. They provide venture capital for high-tech startups—"

"In-house money," I interrupted, "or do they raise capital outside the firm?"

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"All in-house," Roscoe answered, a distinct tone of admiration creeping into his voice. "Mason's personal fortune is somewhere in the mid nine figures, and his partners have each added over a hundred million to the stake." He smiled, doubtless at the thought of having such men as clients.

"But there is, I take it, a cockroach in the spaghetti."

The smile dropped off Roscoe's lips. "What?"

"H. L. Mencken," I answered, trying not to sound too pedantic. "He once said something to the effect that it takes very little to make a man unhappy: a pebble in your shoe, a cockroach in the spaghetti, the sound of a woman's laugh." I paused a beat. "I'm assuming that for the excessively wealthy Mr. Garrett and his *soi-disant* partners there's a cockroach in the spaghetti."

"There is," Roscoe said, nodding as if to confirm the veracity of his own response. "Mason is convinced that one of his partners is utilizing insider information to trade in the stock of companies that they've taken public."

I shrugged, thinking, *Why am I not surprised?* "What does the SEC say? I assume he's notified them of his suspicions."

Roscoe shook his head emphatically. "Mason is absolutely obsessive about the reputation of Pan-Pacific. He feels that an insider-trading scandal would tarnish not only the firm but also his own good name. So instead of going to the U.S. Attorney's office and the SEC enforcement branch, he hired a private security firm run by former FBI and SEC enforcement personnel."

"And?"

"Nada. All they managed to turn up was a pattern of vaguely suspicious trades in the stock of companies Pan-Pacific had taken public. All the trades had been executed through a maze of privately held offshore companies, and none of them could be traced, directly or indirectly, back to any of Mason's partners."

"Did they only look at trades?"

"No." Roscoe shook his head again. "They did extensive undercover surveillance on the four partners, both direct and indirect."

I nodded, a sardonic smile on my face. "By indirect I assume you mean they planted illegal wiretaps and opened mail."

"Assume what you want," Roscoe advised, rolling his eyes, "but you heard nothing of the sort from me." He paused a beat. "After Mason's private investigation crapped out I told him about you."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

"Including my three years at Folsom?"

"Everything," Roscoe repeated firmly. "Especially about the work you did for Anne Peabody." He smiled. "Mason particularly liked the part about the golf clubs."

"So now he thinks—"

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"He thinks," Roscoe interrupted, "that sometimes an unorthodox approach can succeed where other, more traditional ones have failed. Much like the approach you used to solve the Peabody murder."

"That was dumb luck," I interjected, meaning it.

"Anne Peabody didn't think it was dumb luck and neither do I. In any event, here's the deal: Starting tomorrow morning you begin work at Pan-Pacific as an administrative assistant."

"Wearing what?" I asked sarcastically. "Faded blue jeans and a Grateful Dead T-shirt? Roscoe, have you and your client given any thought to the fact that a fifty-something white guy showing up out of the blue as the new office boy is about as subtle as . . . " I ran out of words, unable to think of a ridiculous enough analogy that wasn't obscene.

"Indeed we have thought of it," Roscoe answered smugly, the gleam in his eye telling me that he was quite pleased with the ruse they had come up with. "Mason is telling his partners and the office staff that you're a recent graduate of a new substance-abuse program set up by the district attorney's office, and that by hiring you the firm is receiving state tax benefits well in excess of the salary you're being paid." He paused a second, obviously waiting for me to congratulate him on his cleverness. When no such words of praise were forthcoming, he continued, "Working there, you'll be in a unique position to observe Mason's partners and possibly come up with something the others missed."

"I doubt it," I said, without a trace of false modesty. "Are you absolutely certain you can't convince your client to do this the intelligent way—i.e., take his suspicions to the SEC or the U.S. Attorney's office?"

"I'm absolutely certain. Believe me, I've argued and cajoled almost to the point of losing both Mason Garrett and Pan-Pacific as clients. And given that fact . . . " He paused a beat for emphasis. ". . . both Mason Garrett and I are convinced that you," he pointed at me, "are his last best hope."

So nine days later I'm standing at the espresso machine in Pan-Pacific's Palo Alto offices, steaming nonfat milk and pulling an espresso for Barton Adams, Mason Garrett's soon-to-be son-in-law, and thinking about cockroaches. Nothing I had seen or heard in my eight days of employment led me to conclude anything other than that the venture-capital business attracted world-class jerks, Mason Garrett not excluded. The notion that I was going to catch any of Mason's partners indulging in a little old-fashioned insider trading was nothing less than foolish, as I had predicted in Roscoe Jackson's office in the Transamerica Pyramid. I mean, think about it: A private security firm with literally unlimited resources, staffed with ex-FBI and SEC employees, shoots nothing but craps and a

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disbarred, unemployed con who's never owned so much as a share in a mutual fund is somehow going to come out rolling sevens?

"Not in this life," I murmured as I carried the latte, an almond biscotti on a plate of English bone china, and a linen napkin to Barton Adams's office. He didn't even bother to look up from his reading as I placed everything carefully on his desk and then turned to leave.

"Wait a minute, uh . . ."

"William," I said, not quite smiling. "It's William Smith, remember?" I had been around this toad, not to mention his churlish father-in-law-to-be, long enough not to expect so much as a simple thank-you for the latte. It was people like these that the Bolsheviks must have greatly enjoyed lining up against a wall in the Kremlin and shooting in 1918.

"Yeah, William, I want you to run a little errand for me." He reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a thick bundle of cash held by what appeared to be a solid-gold money clip. "There's a ladies' intimate-apparel shop over at the Stanford Shopping Center called Sweet Nothings. They're holding a package for me that I want you to pay for and pick up." He peeled the first three bills, all hundreds, off his wad of cash and handed them to me. He paused a beat to make sure I was paying attention. "This is a *private* errand, if you get my point."

I stared at him with a blank expression, not saying a word, in the hope of irritating him. It worked.

"Keep your mouth shut about it, is what I'm saying," he snapped. "When you get back here with the package, don't bring it into the office." He tossed me the beeper for his Mercedes. "Put it in the trunk of my car. If anyone asks where you've been, you tell them that I sent you out to make a bank deposit for me." He glared at me with what he probably thought was a tough-guy expression. "Do you think you can handle that?"

I smiled like a simpleton and tucked the three hundred dollars into my pocket. "I think so," I said, nodding my head as I backed out of his office. An expensive little gift for the blushing bride-to-be, I thought as I made the short drive down Sand Hill Road to the Stanford Shopping Center. I parked and quickly found the store, tucked in among the many other boutiques that serviced the nouveaux riches of Silicon Valley. The shop's owner greeted me with a look that told me she had immediately pegged me for an errand boy. I wasn't the least offended, my ego having been toughened up considerably by three years of making license plates for the State of California. "I'm here to pick up a package for Mr. Barton Adams," I informed her, my peripheral vision taking in the tasteful displays of obscenely expensive ladies' underwear.

She produced a small package wrapped, you'll love this, in plain brown-paper, and handed me an invoice. "The total amount due

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comes to two hundred and ninety-five dollars," she said carefully, looking as if she wanted to see if I had the money before risking a smile. Sure enough, when I laid the three hundred-dollar bills Adams had given me on the counter, she lightened up considerably.

While she rang up the sale I casually examined the invoice. It was for three pairs of Swiss cotton panties, size two, together with three matching cotton brassieres, size 32A. I looked up at the shop's owner, a little surprised. I had seen the future Mrs. Barton Adams on a number of occasions when she came to the office and, while she was not an overly large young woman, I would have bet a considerable amount of money that she hadn't been able to fit into size 2 undies since she was in the fourth grade. And, thanks, no doubt, to a Palo Alto plastic surgeon, she was sure as hell packing more than a pair of 32A's. Way more.

"Excuse me," I said as the owner gave me a five-dollar bill in change, "but are you sure that these," I pointed to the sizes on the invoice, "are the correct sizes?"

"Indeed they are," she replied with just the slightest hint of indignation. "I took the order from Mr. Adams myself."

No wonder Adams had been so concerned about confidentiality, I thought as I drove back to Pan-Pacific's offices. He's not even married yet and he's got a girlfriend on the side. And a petite one at that. "The little toad better be careful," I murmured, turning carefully into Pan-Pacific's parking lot, figuring that his bride-to-be, as Mason Garrett's daughter, was Barton Adams's fast-track ticket to partnership in the firm.

"Everything taken care of?" Adams asked as I walked into his office.

"I put it in the trunk of your car," I confirmed, handing him back the beeper to his Mercedes and the invoice from Sweet Nothings. "Oh, and," I reached into my pocket and took out the five-dollar bill I had gotten from the shop's owner, "here's your change."

Adams glanced at the bill to confirm the denomination, and then waved a hand as if brushing lint off the lapel of his suit jacket. "Keep it," he muttered, his tone of voice implying that anything less than a fifty was too much trouble for a man like him to bother with.

Thank you, Santa Claus, I thought but of course did not say as I backed out of his office. I walked down the hall to the office suite's kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. The five-dollar tip brought back to my mind's eye the sight of all the cash folded into his money clip. Since most of what I saw were hundred-dollar bills, I thought it safe to assume that he kept well over a thousand dollars as walking-around money. Even for a guy making as much money as Adams made, that was a lot of cash. As I carefully sipped my coffee I thought about what Roscoe Jackson had told me about Adams when he was briefing me on the firm's personnel.

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"A real bright kid," Roscoe had said, "with an economics degree from Harvard, and an MBA from Dartmouth."

"Where else has he worked?" I remember asking.

"Nowhere," Roscoe told me, shaking his head. "Pan-Pacific's his first real job out of school. He was out here looking for work when he met Mason's daughter Julie at a club in San Francisco. A whirlwind romance of a month or two followed and then, boom, a marriage proposal."

"Who asked whom?"

Roscoe had smiled. "Does it matter? Mason and his wife both think Adams is a spectacular catch for their daughter. Mason so much so that he offered the kid a job at Pan-Pacific—over the objections of his partners, I might add."

"Why did they object?"

"They don't like the fact that he doesn't have any experience in private industry. They all made their fortunes, as Mason did, in the high-tech business *before* they got into venture capital, and, naturally enough, think that's the way Adams should do it—not by riding his future father-in-law's coattails."

Roscoe had gone on to tell me that I was not to waste any time thinking about Adams as a potential suspect in the alleged insider-trading scam at Pan-Pacific. "Mason considers Adams a member of the family already, so forget about him and concentrate on Mason's four partners."

Nothing I had seen over the past eight days had caused me to question Roscoe's instructions regarding Adams. To be sure, the kid was a first-class jerk but, hey, so was everyone else in the office as far as I was concerned. And, even after finding out that he was in all likelihood having an affair with one woman while engaged to another (begging the question, can one be said to be a *prospective* adulterer?), I still had no reason to associate that particular moral shortcoming with a willingness to engage in insider trading. Nonetheless, if Mason Garrett's high-powered security firm had been able to turn up nothing on his four partners (assuming that they—the security firm—had been told, as I had been, to disregard future son-in-law Adams), why not give at least a cursory glance in that direction? God knows Mason Garrett was paying me way too much just to be serving lattes and running personal errands.

The main lobby of the aptly named (depending, of course, on your point of view) Hall of Justice in San Francisco always reminds me of Grand Central Station in New York—crowds of people doing their damnedest to get out of it as quickly as possible. I can't think of a soul who likes being there—not the police coming to testify in criminal trials, not the assistant D.A.s nor the public defenders, not the bailiffs nor even the judges, and certainly not the defendants. The

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latter category I knew, of course, from personal experience. It's that kind of place. Still, if you want to do some private business with one of the assistant D.A.s, it's the one place you can always find them.

"So, what have you got here?" Junie Roberts raised an eyebrow when I laid a plastic bag containing a latte glass on his state government-issue metal desk. Junie and I went back a long ways together, back to when we both began practicing law in the City, him just starting out with the D.A.'s office, me in private practice after a one-year clerkship at the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. Of all the so-called pals I had in the old days, Junie was one of only two who stayed in touch while I was at Folsom—Roscoe Jackson was the other.

"I need a small favor," I said. The latte glass in the plastic bag was the one I had used when I made Barton Adams's latte the previous afternoon. When Barton left the office at the end of the day I had carefully picked it up from his desk and bagged it. This morning I called in sick to Pan-Pacific and headed down to the Hall of Justice.

"Define *small.*"

I pointed at the bagged latte glass. "There are two sets of fingerprints on that glass—mine and a John Doe. I need to get an ID on the John Doe."

Junie nodded, clearly relieved that this was all I wanted. "You think he's in the database?"

"I doubt it, but . . ." I shrugged, "that's why God made computers, right?"

"You working on something for Roscoe Jackson?" Junie knew that Roscoe had set me up with Anne Peabody after the SFPD had crapped out in their search for her brother's murderer.

"Yeah, but I can't really tell you anything about it right now." I pointed again at the bagged latte glass. "This is probably a dead end, but I'm curious as to whether or not the prints might show up in the criminal database."

"I'll have someone take this over to the fingerprint bureau and get them to lift and run the prints." He looked at his watch and then back at me. It was a little after nine o'clock. "Why don't you give me a call tomorrow afternoon?"

"Any chance of getting an answer *this* afternoon?"

"I thought you said this was a *small* favor." Junie paused a beat to make his point and then nodded. "Okay, come by after three o'clock. If the computer finds anything on the first pass I'll give you a printout."

Outside it was turning into a beautiful morning as the fog burned off, so I decided to walk from the Hall of Justice over to Roscoe's office at the Transamerica Pyramid. It was a bit of a hike but, like I said, the weather was unusually nice. Roscoe was busy but managed to squeeze me in for a couple of minutes.

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The first thing I noticed when I walked into his office was that his windows were even dirtier than before. God only knew what those peregrine falcons were bringing back to the nest for their progeny to devour. Mostly pigeons, I hoped. "You've got several partners who're Harvard grads, don't you?" I asked, getting right to the point.

Roscoe nodded affirmatively, a distinct look of caution in his face.

"Relax," I joked, "this won't hurt a bit. I need one of them to call someone in the university registrar's office and have them fax you a copy of Barton Adams's undergraduate transcript." I paused a beat. "Today, if at all possible."

"I don't think the university will do it without Adams's prior written approval," Roscoe said.

"They will if a big contributor to the Harvard endowment fund, as I'm sure at least one of your partners is, does the asking. Tell them to say that your firm is checking his references for a client who's considering hiring Adams."

"Why the sudden interest in Adams? Didn't I tell you that he's not a suspect?"

"I'm just tidying up a few loose ends," I said nonchalantly, not wanting to admit that it was only because I had come up with nothing regarding Garrett's partners that I was taking a flier on the soon-to-be son-in-law. If the kid came up clean on Junie Roberts's SFPD computer search, and his Harvard transcript looked legit, I figured I was dead in the water on the whole deal. "I'll call you later today."

I walked over to Market Street and caught a Muni trolley car out to the Sunset District. The regular day crowd at O'Mahoney's Irish Pub consists of an agreeable mix of retirees, chronically unemployed (and unemployable) poets, disabled veterans, and the occasional con waiting out a stretch of freedom before doing something stupid again. I caught hell for not showing up the past two weeks but explained it away by saying that I had been laying low in the face of a particularly aggressive bill collector. Believe me, anyone who's ever spent much time hanging out in a neighborhood bar during the daylight hours would have no trouble whatsoever identifying with such a story. In any event, I kicked back, drank a couple of Anchor Steams, ate a bacon-and-avocado sandwich, and, by the time I'd shot a couple of racks of post-lunch pool, it was time to go see Junie Roberts at the Hall of Justice again.

"Is this your John Doe?"

Junie handed me a computer printout complete with booking photos, classic side and front views, of Barton Adams. Only his name wasn't Barton Adams, it was Julius Dutchendorf, a.k.a. Julius Deutsch, a.k.a. James Nichols. Jesus, for a young guy Barton (as I still thought of him) had already gone through three or four aliases. The accompanying rap sheet described a con artist

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who specialized in boiler-room scams beating old ladies out of their retirement funds. Two relatively short stretches in state prison (both in the California Correctional Center country club lockup at Susanville—some guys have all the luck)—the first one while his classmates at Modesto High were celebrating their senior prom—seemed not to have accomplished the desired goal of rehabilitation. The guy was slick, I'll have to give him that. He'd managed to segue seamlessly from being a small-time chiseler to impersonating a major-league Silicon Valley venture capitalist. Of course, many would say that a crook in a bespoke three-thousand-dollar English suit would not by definition stand out in the rarefied atmosphere of high-tech deal making.

I looked up at Junie and smiled. "Bingo."

"What's Mr. Dutchendorf been up to?" Junie asked. "Something I should be aware of in an official capacity?"

"Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor," I responded, smiling. "Namely himself. Nothing the State of California need concern itself with, inasmuch as you don't have enough time or resources as it is to deal with all the murderers, rapists, and assorted thugs who present themselves at your doorstep every single day." I pointed to his desk phone. "May I?"

"Help yourself." He looked at his watch and stood up. "I'm due in court. Close the door on your way out."

"Thanks, Junie, I owe you one."

"Don't worry," he said, straightening his tie and putting on his coat. "I'm running a tab for you."

As soon as he was gone I dialed Roscoe Jackson's direct line. "Roscoe, did you get Barton Adams's Harvard transcript?" I listened for a second. "Good. Tell me, what are the dates of his attendance?" I listened again while Roscoe read them off, smiling to myself. "Okay, you need to call your client Mason Garrett and set up a meeting in your office as soon as possible. . . . What? No, I'll fill you in when Mason's there."

Roscoe and Mason Garrett were waiting when I walked into Roscoe's office bright and early the next morning. "Sorry I'm late, gents," I said, smiling like a man about to lay down a straight flush. "Blame it on the Muni. Why the mayor can't get those buses and trolleys running on time is a mystery to me."

"What have you got?" Mason growled impatiently as Roscoe threw me a look that advised extreme caution.

Without a word I handed him the SFPD booking card I had gotten from Junie. Mason glanced at it and then looked back at me, an expression of incredulity mixed with anger on his face. "What the hell is this?" he demanded.

"That," I said evenly, pointing at the booking card in his hand,

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"is your soon-to-be son-in-law Barton Adams, or, as he is known to his doting mother, Julius Dutchendorf."

Mason looked from me over to Roscoe and then back to me. After several seconds he spoke. "I don't understand," he said, although it was clear he could see where things were heading.

"Barton Adams is an alias," I said. "One of several he's used in his relatively short life of crime. Julius Dutchendorf was, until he met and romanced your daughter, a small-time chiseler, nothing more or less than a moderately unsuccessful con artist who ran low-rent boiler-room scams between stints in prison. Somewhere along the line he set his sights a little higher, and . . . " I let my voice trail off, knowing that Mason would have no trouble finishing the sentence.

"But he went to Harvard, and the business school at Dartmouth," Mason said, more to Roscoe than to me. "I mean, we didn't just rely on a resume, we checked his transcripts."

"Unfortunately," I said, careful not to smile, "Adams, née Dutchendorf, was incarcerated by the State of California during the eighteen-month period that he was supposedly a junior and senior at Harvard." I paused long enough to help myself to a cup of coffee from a silver thermos on Roscoe's credenza. "I think you'll find that his transcripts from both Harvard and Dartmouth are phonies, planted somehow in the registrars' offices after Dutchendorf got out of prison. I also suspect that his initial meeting with your daughter was somehow deliberately engineered."

"My daughter," Mason said, his voice barely above a whisper. He looked at me, anger returning to his face. "They are—were—going to be married in June."

"I'm not so sure about that," I said, shaking my head. "Unfortunately, in addition to his many other shortcomings, Barton Adams has not been entirely forthcoming with your daughter as regards his matrimonial eligibility."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he already has a wife. A Korean woman, if her name is any indication. My guess is that he's deserted her, because she's living on welfare and food stamps in public housing out in the Western Addition. Nonetheless, the State of California still considers him to be legally married." Adams's rap sheet had helpfully included a short bio put together by the probation office, and it hadn't been terribly difficult to track his wife's address down through the city Social Services office. I hadn't bothered to go and actually meet her—just knowing where she lived was sufficient for the purposes of my report to Garrett.

"When did you put all this together?" Roscoe asked, an unmistakable tone of admiration and approval in his voice, no doubt as much for Mason Garrett's benefit as for mine.

"Yesterday," I replied. "I lifted a set of Adams's fingerprints from

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the office and had a friend down at the Hall of Justice run them through the SFPD's computer database."

"But what led you to suspect Adams in the first place?" Roscoe persisted.

"Intuition," I said, shrugging modestly. I had already decided that there was no point in telling them that had the arrogant fool not sent me on the demeaning little errand to Sweet Nothings I would never have had reason to suspect him of anything other than bad manners. "The rest was just a matter of connecting the dots." I turned my attention back to Mason Garrett. "Needless to say, I'm not in a position to follow through with an investigation involving the enforcement branch of the Securities and Exchange Commission, but it's not much of a stretch to conclude that Julius Dutchendorf is almost certainly the guilty party behind your insider-trading problem. However, I must say that one thing troubles me a great deal."

"What's that?" Garrett asked.

"The length to which Dutchendorf went to set this whole thing up is entirely out of character for such a low-level chiseler and con man. A great deal of thought, not to mention forgery expertise, went into phonying up transcripts from Harvard and Dartmouth, and probably no small amount of money changed hands in the process of getting them planted in the schools' records. Granted, Dutchendorf almost certainly has a confederate, presumably someone who has the requisite contacts and experience to pull off such a stunt, but my intuition tells me that what we're talking about here goes beyond merely letting him into your office so he could do a little insider trading."

"What are you proposing?" Garrett asked suspiciously.

I glanced over at Roscoe before answering. "I'm suggesting that, based on what I've uncovered, you involve the U.S. Attorney's office in a comprehensive investigation of Julius Dutchendorf."

"I will do no such thing," Garrett responded emphatically. "As far as I'm concerned, Barton Adams, or Dutchendorf, or whatever his name is, is nothing more than a common thief. I intend to fire him this afternoon and be done with it." He stood up and pointed at me. "And I remind you that at the time you accepted this assignment you signed a strict confidentiality agreement, one to which I fully expect you to adhere."

"You have no need for concern along those lines," I assured him, thinking, *It's your funeral, pal. And your money.* Out of the corner of my eye I could see Roscoe breathe a sigh of relief over the fact that I hadn't argued with his client.

"Good." Garrett turned and, without another word, left the office.

"What a jerk," I muttered as soon as Roscoe and I were alone.

"You did a good—no, a great job," Roscoe said, a smile on his face. "And believe me, Mason Garrett knows it, too, his gruff words

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notwithstanding. I'll see that you get a nice bonus on top of the fee we agreed upon when you started."

"Whatever," I said, trying to sound nonchalant, but pleased at the thought of costing Garrett a little more money. "Nonetheless, you should try to convince him to go to the U.S. Attorney's office."

Roscoe shook his head with finality. "It won't happen. As I told you at the outset, he's obsessed with the notion of keeping Pan-Pacific Equity Partners absolutely pristine, reputation-wise. He'll stop at nothing, and I mean nothing, to keep any sort of scandal, particularly one involving insider trading by one of his employees, out of the public eye. He'll fire Barton Adams and that will be the end of it."

"I'm not so sure about that, but," I smiled broadly, "as he so eloquently put it, it's none of my business."

"You know what I can't understand about this whole thing?" Roscoe asked after a second or two.

"What's that?"

"How Dutchendorf was able to so completely pull the wool over Mason Garrett's eyes. I mean, think about it, Dutchendorf didn't even graduate from high school, and yet he seemed to have no trouble blending into Garrett's high-tech, big-dollar world."

"The answer's so simple most people won't even believe it," I said, smiling. "He's good-looking."

"What?" Roscoe's tone of voice was one of incredulity.

"He's good-looking. *Hollywood* good-looking." I paused a beat. "There was an old con at Folsom while I was there, a man everyone called the Silver Fox. He was over seventy and, believe it or not, was a dead ringer for Paul Newman—right down to the electric blue eyes, and that wavy hair with just a touch of white at the temples." I laughed delightedly at the memory. "Even in the joint he went to the trouble of keeping it dyed with black shoe polish. He wore his prison dungarees like they'd been tailored for him in Italy, and ate in the mess hall like he was dining at the Ritz. He'd been a confidence man all his life and told me that the only weapon he ever used was a custom-tailored tuxedo. Anyway, he advised me once, in all seriousness, never to trust a really good-looking man or woman—they'll break your heart every time." I laughed again. "As he explained it, the problem is that they grow up as the absolute center of everyone's attention, with the other boys and girls always deferring to them, following their lead in just about everything. What that teaches them is that they can do or have just about anything they want. And it only gets worse—as adults, when they walk into a room they're instantly the center of attention, objects of jealousy and fear. If they're smart enough to keep their mouths shut most of the time everyone will automatically assume that they're highly intelligent."

"You're right—it's too simplistic to believe," Roscoe interjected,

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shaking his head.

I laughed, nodding in agreement. "But it's true. Think about it—an average-looking guy, someone like you or me, could never have pulled off what Dutchendorf managed to do. As you yourself said, he was a high-school dropout spending his days in the company of Ivy League MBAs, Stanford and Cal Ph.D.s, computer geeks, whatever, and nobody even came close to putting him on the spot."

"Nobody but you."

"I had the distinct advantage of having spent three years in prison, learning what all convicts learn—how to be a better crook. And believe me, the old Silver Fox was right—a good-looking man or woman, and I mean *really* good-looking, can get away with things you'd think a twelve-year-old would spot. Until," I smiled, "they get overconfident and do something stupid." I told Roscoe about the serendipitous errand to Sweet Nothings. He looked startled and then laughed until tears appeared at the corners of his eyes.

"I love it," he managed to say when the laughter subsided.

"But don't tell Mason Garrett," I warned, shaking a finger for emphasis. "He might be disinclined to pay me that bonus you talked about if he thought I tumbled Dutchendorf's whole scheme based on something so mundane as a set of ladies' underwear."

The bonus Roscoe promised turned out to be twenty-five thousand dollars, an amount that left me speechless when Roscoe called me to his office a couple of days later to give me the check. It came with another confidentiality agreement, one even more comprehensive and Draconian than the first one I'd signed, and I realized that the 25K was nothing more than Mason Garrett's heavy-handed way of further ensuring my silence. The money meant literally nothing to him compared with the reputation of his firm. If Roscoe had been a little worried that I might have gotten up on a high horse and refused to sign the agreement, he shouldn't have been. I signed it in the blink of an eye and deposited the check before anybody could change their minds. About a week later I was sitting in O'Mahoney's pub reading the sports page and sipping an Anchor Steam when Roscoe walked in, his face ashen.

"Jesus, Roscoe," I said, waving him to a chair at my small table, "what the hell are you doing here in the middle of the afternoon?"

He glanced around as if fearful that someone might overhear us and then spoke, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper. "Julius Dutchendorf was murdered two days ago."

Surprised, I stared at him for a second, and then thought of the obvious. "Mason Garrett didn't—"

"No, no," Roscoe interrupted, "as mad as he was, Garrett had nothing to do with it." He paused a beat and looked around again. "Dutchendorf was shot once in the head, while he was sitting in

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his car in the parking lot of the Stanford mall. A day after the body was found, Garrett got a visit from the FBI." He paused again, waiting for a reaction from me.

I shrugged and remained silent.

"It seems that the FBI and," his voice dropped even lower, "the CIA had been investigating Dutchendorf for over a year on suspicion of industrial espionage."

"Why the hell would the CIA have been involved? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"The FBI agent who visited Garrett told him that they believed Dutchendorf was working for the North Koreans."

"His so-called wife," I interrupted, snapping my fingers. "She must have been his controller."

"Exactly. And, not surprisingly, she's disappeared. As soon as Dutchendorf's body was found, the FBI moved in to bust her and found only an empty apartment."

"I expect she's on a slow freighter bound for North Korea even as we speak." I paused for a second. "I wonder if she's the one who did Dutchendorf?"

"It wouldn't surprise me. In any event, the North Korean connection explains everything," Roscoe continued. "They would have had the money and the expertise to have created a whole new identity for Dutchendorf, planted the phony transcripts at Harvard and Dartmouth, and arranged for Dutchendorf, now Barton Adams, to meet Garrett's daughter as an entrée into Pan-Pacific. Once inside, so to speak, he would have been in the perfect position to gather and pass along highly confidential scientific data from Pan-Pacific's high-tech clients. The North Koreans would have gotten literally hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of scientific and industrial research for next to nothing."

"But they didn't count on the fact that someone like Julius Dutchendorf would also take the opportunity to indulge in a little private insider-trading activity." I couldn't help smiling at the thought. "For his own account, of course."

"Exactly. The FBI agent told Garrett that when he fired Dutchendorf it infuriated his North Korean sponsors—they had spent an enormous amount of time and money creating the perfect undercover operative and then he queers the whole deal by getting his hand caught in the till, so to speak."

"I can see how they'd be annoyed," I said drily. "I mean, if you can't trust a thief, who can you trust?" I paused a second, thinking of something. "Whoa, Garrett's going to have a stroke when all this hits the papers."

"Not if he can help it," Roscoe replied, shaking his head for emphasis. "He's flying back to Washington this afternoon to meet with various senators and representatives in an effort to have

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them pressure the FBI and the CIA to keep the whole thing under wraps as a national security matter." Roscoe paused, cleared his throat, and looked away for a second. "And there's one other thing you should know," he added, looking back at me.

"Garrett better not want his bonus money back," I said, half jokingly. "If he does, tell him that I've already spent it."

"No, nothing like that," Roscoe assured me. He smiled. "If anything, Garrett's happy you broke things up before the feds could arrest Dutchendorf and bring a very public criminal indictment." His smile faded. "But the feds, the FBI and CIA, are mad as hell at you for exposing Dutchendorf before they could move in on him. I wanted you to know because there's a chance they might try to make trouble for you with the state, along the lines of your being an unlicensed investigator."

"Not to mention a paroled felon and disbarred lawyer," I added sourly. "Don't those morons realize that any half-competent trial attorney," I pointed at Roscoe and smiled, "you, for instance, could get a bogus charge like that thrown out on a simple pretrial motion?" I waved a hand dismissively. "Bleep them and the horse they rode in on." I thought of something and my smile broadened. "Besides, Mason Garrett must know that if the feds try too hard to bust my chops I just might go public with what I know."

Roscoe returned my smile, albeit a little nervously. "He's already thought of that and you are very much on his confidentiality agenda back in Washington. I doubt you've got much to worry about, but I wanted you to know, just in case."

"I appreciate your concern," I said, meaning it. Like I said, of all my classmates at Stanford Law School, not to mention all the attorneys I had practiced with in the city, Roscoe Jackson and Junie Roberts at the San Francisco D.A.'s office were the only two who'd stuck by me when my life had gone to hell. As far as I was concerned, both their photographs should be used to illustrate the definition of "friend" in Webster's Dictionary. Holding up my empty Anchor Steam bottle, I waved at Harriet, the bartender. "Let me buy you a beer."

"I can't stay," he said regretfully. He looked around the bar. "So this is where you hang out." He looked back at me and smiled. "Life could be worse."

"And has been," I assured him. "Listen, Roscoe, one thing I learned at Folsom, other than how to make license plates, is that life is short—things pass you by in the blink of an eye. Why don't you take an afternoon off one day soon and spend it with me, here? We'll shoot a little pool, drink a little beer, kick back and talk about how sweet life was before things got so," I shrugged, "out of control."

"Maybe I will," he said, more than a little wistfully. He stood up and smiled down at me, both of us knowing better but neither willing to say so. "Maybe I will." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

MAX WINNER'S SHADOW

by Peter Turnbull

The man enjoyed the walk. He always did. Just he and his dog and a summer's morning. It was "their" time—his feet crumbling the loose gravel on the towpath as the last of the haze rose from the canal and his dog twisting and turning, now ahead of him, now beside him, now behind him, now ahead of him again. They rounded the bend of the canal and entered the phase of the walk that the man loved most of all, where thick vegetation grew at either side of the canal and reached out over the water, so that in summer especially, when the foliage was at its most lush, this part of the canal resembled a walk in a tunnel. It was in this section of the York canal that the man saw the greatest incidence of wildlife, the moorhens, kingfishers, stoats, and water rats. The latter he minded not, for like all creatures, they had a place in the scheme of things. Here they were wild, not scavengers living off the debris of humankind, and he chose to accept them as beasts in their own place. And he also saw insects, dragonflies, butterflies, spiders. At the end of the "tunnel" ahead of him, he could see the black-and-white gates of the "Larkfield Three-Rise," a tier of three

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locks which lifted the canal up a full thirty feet to its next section, which took it across the Wold towards Hull and the seaport there. Or lowered it for the final stretch into York, depending upon which way the barge, now a pleasure craft rather than a working boat, was travelling. The man walked slowly, savouring the walk, just he and his best friend. An onlooker would see a man in his sixties, plus fours, stout shoes, a tweed jacket, and a white Norfolk hat, and with him, a confident chocolate-brown Labrador. The man left the shade of the "tunnel" and put himself at the inclined path which ran alongside the three-rise until he stood at the top, pausing. These days he was finding the incline difficult . . . even a short incline such as this he found hard. He could, he felt, walk forever upon the flat, but inclines were proving difficult. He paused at the top of the incline and pondered the next section of the walk, another six hundred yards of canal towpath and then he'd turn into the wood and begin the sweep back towards home. He expected to be home by nine-thirty . . . in time for Morning Service on the BBC. It was a good walk, about three hours long, and he and his friend did it together twice a week, in all but the most extreme weather conditions.

Then he saw a shiny black object in the canal, and tutted at folk who thought nothing of throwing their refuse into the water. With a jolt, he realised that he wasn't looking at a black bin liner containing domestic rubbish, he was looking at oily water shimmering on a leather jacket which encased a human body, floating facedown in the water.

The body was that of a female. The first police officer to attend waded into the canal and was eventually forced to swim the last few feet, the water being just too deep for a tall man to wade. He reached the body, gasping at the chill of the water despite it being high summer, and rolled it faceup, just in case there was still time, but the pale and bloated, macerated skin said that all hope had gone. He swam sideways, dragging the body with him back to the towpath, where he and his colleague together hauled the body out of the water. Closer examination showed her to be a woman of

The true police procedural, in which the routine of police investigation is logged throughout the course of the mystery, has almost died out at short-story length in the U.S. Peter Turnbull, who writes procedurals set in his native Yorkshire, is keeping the form alive and well in the U.K., and *EQMM* is pleased to have a number of his stories on hand for next year. Readers interested in his novels should look for *The Dance Master* (Severn House/ May '04). ✝

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middle years and possibly, probably, of privileged living. The leather jacket was not inexpensive, neither was the watch, nor the jewelry, nor the skirt, nor the shoes, which had remained on her feet, held firmly as the body expanded.

One of the police officers, the one who remained dry, stayed with the corpse. The other, saturated and chilled, walked to where they had parked the area car. He called Friargate police station, requested the police surgeon and C.I.D. attendance. He added that the death was probably suspicious, if only because middle-aged, middle-class women do not walk along canal towpaths alone at night. They just don't.

When, thirty minutes later, the police surgeon arrived, he noted a blue-and-white police tape around the body, which by then lay under a black plastic sheet. He noted a member of the public being told firmly but politely that he couldn't walk along the canal despite the fact that he did that each morning. The police surgeon approached the tape, knelt by the body, lifted the plastic sheet, and let it fall reverently back in place as the member of the public turned and walked sullenly away.

"I can confirm life extinct." The police surgeon stood. "At nine-ten A.M."

"Nine-ten A.M., sir?" the police constable repeated and noted in his notebook. He glanced up and noted two figures walking towards them along the towpath. "C.I.D. here now, sir."

"Good. . . . I think they'll be needed." He turned and glanced and nodded at the approaching figures, one a white male, the other a black female. Both tall, both slim, walking easily in each other's company, occasionally rubbing shoulders; two people who liked each other. "Dr. Truelove," he said when the officers were close enough.

"D.C.s Pharoah and Markov." The woman spoke. "I'm Pharoah."

"We haven't met. Not local, are you, by your accent?"

"St. Kitts, via Stoke Newington, London." Carmen Pharoah smiled.

"Pleased to meet you. Well, to the matter in hand." Truelove turned to the body. "I think you'll be needing a pathologist. The police constable who phoned it in was correct to assume suspicious circumstances. She didn't drown, you see. I can tell that virtually at a glance. Eyes closed, you see. She was either unconscious or deceased before she entered the water. But that's really the territory of the Home Office pathologist, not I."

"I see," Carmen Pharoah said. "Pathologist, as you say."

"I've pronounced life extinct at nine-ten, this day. It's really up to the pathologist now."

"Wonder where she came into the canal?" Carmen Pharoah said, more to herself than anyone around her. "No sign of a struggle here that I can see."

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"Up there." The constable spoke. He pointed along the canal, away from the locks, towards Hull and the coast. "She would have drifted down overnight. Canals have currents, like rivers."

"I didn't know that." Markov spoke.

"It's true, sir." The police constable spoke confidently. "All canals are the same. They benefit from rainwater which runs off the land into the canal, but each canal has a river or a stream or a lake close to the highest point and they flow down from there. This part of the canal drains into the Ouse at York." He turned. "In that direction. So she would have drifted down from the opposite direction until she reached the locks, where she was caught."

"Makes sense." Markov nodded. "We'll take a walk up there." Carmen Pharoah pressed the Send button on her radio and called Friargate police station, requesting the pathologist and the mortuary van. She and Markov walked eastwards along the towpath in the opposite direction of the current. As she walked, she had to concede that this really was a very, very attractive part of England, lush fields and a flat landscape. She thought that she might, just might, settle here after all. She knew that she couldn't go back to London . . . horror of horrors . . . the commuting . . . and while St. Kitts would always be "home," to return there was not an option. But York, and North Yorkshire . . . an ancient city . . . affordable housing . . . vast skies produced by a flat landscape.

There are worse places.

Every few hundred yards along the York and Hull canal, as with all British canals, there are stone ramps which lead from the towpath into the water, the ramps being inclined towards each other with a gap of about six feet between them. Their purpose was to enable a horse to be recovered from the canal, so that should a horse that was pulling a barge slip into the canal, it could be unhitched from the barge and worked along the canal, through the water, until a ramp was reached where it could easily walk back up to the towpath, and be returned and rehitched to the barge. Diesel engines have rendered such ramps redundant, but they remain, and the six-foot gap between each ramp tends to be a collection point for floating debris. It was between two such ramps that Simon Markov noticed a handbag, black leather, floating among the plastic bags and bottles. He knelt down and fished it out of the water.

The handbag, by its contents, belonged to one Sadie Winner. The driving license in that name gave an address of Dovecote Cottage, Lesser Listlea, North Yorkshire.

"I wonder what sort of car she drove?" Markov pondered. "She wasn't without money. Lesser Listlea is a wealthy village, it's not far from here . . . and this handbag alone . . . "

"She drove a Beemer," said Carmen Pharoah.

Markov smiled at her. "How do you know that?"

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"Ah . . ." Pharoah grinned. "And I also know the colour. It's silver. German racing silver, as you'd expect of a BMW."

"How—?"

"Because it's there." She pointed to a road bridge over the canal about fifty yards away. The car was not fully visible, just the roof, but sufficient to be able to identify it. A BMW in German racing silver. Stationary, where a car would not be parked.

Markov placed the handbag in the self-sealing production bag and he and Carmen Pharoah walked yet further along the canal, to the bridge, to the steps from the towpath to the road. They examined the car. The doors were not locked, the keys were still in the ignition.

"The only reason this is still here is that its location was not known to the car thieves," Markov said softly, more to himself than to Carmen Pharoah. "So, did she fall or was she pushed?"

"Oh, pushed, I expect," Pharoah replied matter-of-factly, but with tongue in cheek.

"I expect so as well." *He reached for his radio and pressed the* Send button. He reported the location of the car and its possible relevance to the incident, requesting a constable and a roll of blue and white police tape. "She didn't commit suicide. . . . The police surgeon believes that she was not breathing when she went into the water. It's not a suicide spot anyway. . . . So if she was attacked, the attacker had no interest in her possessions . . . the motive wasn't robbery. Her handbag, her jewelry say so."

"Didn't want the car, either," added Pharoah. "He or she or they had to have had a personal motive, unless it was a random attack."

"It's not the place for a random attack," Markov said. "On one hand it's isolated, but on the other, there's quite a lot of traffic down this road. My money is on a personal motive."

Leaving a constable on duty by the BMW, which had blue and white police tape fastened round it, Markov and Pharoah drove to Dovecote Cottage, Lesser Listlea. They found that Dovecote Cottage was a cottage in the same sense that the chapel at Kings College, Cambridge, is a "chapel" despite being as large as a small cathedral; and in the same sense that York is a city despite the fact that in terms of its area, it could fit within the confines of a housing estate in a major city. Dovecote Cottage revealed itself to be a half-timbered Elizabethan manor house, built in an L shape in front of a gravelled courtyard in the middle of which stood a stone fountain belonging to a later, possibly Victorian era. . . . So thought Markov as he slowed the car to a halt beside the Bentley which stood near the front door. The door of the house opened as Markov and Pharoah stepped out of their car.

"Yes?" The man was well built, fifty-something. A dark-blue towelling dressing gown covered silk pajamas.

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"Police."

"Yes?"

"Mr. Winner?" Markov approached and showed his ID.

" 'Tis I."

"We have a few questions. . . ."

"You'd better come in."

Winner received the police in the hallway of his house, where they sat opposite each other on benches which stood alongside walls of ancient panelling underneath a ceiling of ancient beams. "Oh my," he said when Markov revealed the reason for their visit. "Oh my. . . ."

"Do you know what her car would be doing on the bridge over the canal?"

"The bridge in question . . . it's on the route that she favours to get from the village to York. She drives it daily. I prefer the main road, but she likes the rural route. But I've no idea why she should have stopped where she did. Which way was the car pointing?"

"Towards the village."

"So she was coming home. She was very cautious . . . she wouldn't have stopped, not unless it was because she knew someone . . . someone she recognised."

"What time did you expect your wife to return home?"

"Last night? About nine-thirty, ten. She went to visit her sister, she lives in York. The two of them, once they get their heads together, at my expense . . . calling up all my past misdeeds and indiscretions. She was about to take me to the cleaner's. . . . They would have spent the evening planning my ruin."

"So, you'd benefit from your wife's death?"

"Oh yes. . . . In fact, I'm just beginning to realise just what a great weight might have been lifted from my shoulders . . . just what a shadow I am escaping from, if it is my wife."

"We'll have to ask you to accompany us to York District Hospital to identify the body . . . if you can."

"The car, the handbag, the clothing you describe—it'll be her all right. But yes, formality has to be observed."

"Before we go, could you tell us where you were at about nine-thirty last night?"

"Here."

"Alone?"

"Alone. I was working. The industry is in a bad state at the moment."

"The industry?"

"Electronics. I am the Winner of Winner Electronics, the factory on the industrial estate."

"Ah yes." Markov nodded.

"I'm asking my managers to put in unpaid overtime to avert col-

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lapse. I can't do that if I'm not prepared to do the same."

"Of course."

"I made a few phone calls . . . sent a few faxes. . . . They could be confirmed. I have itemised bills. The people to whom I spoke will be able to confirm that 'twas I who spoke."

"This was at nine-thirty?"

"No. . . . No, earlier. I was reading reports at about that time . . . then I went outside. I enjoy the dusk at this time of year—that would have been about nine-thirty, ten, just outside in the garden—but I was alone."

"Your wife, was she depressed of late?"

"No. . . . Just the opposite, in fact. She was enthusiastic in a vindictive sort of way . . . burning up with determination to fleece me in a divorce settlement."

"But she was living here?"

"All part of the Great Plan to ruin me. Can't bring a lady friend home while she's in the house, can I? And she knows it. We sleep separately, but it's still the one roof. . . . Makes things very difficult for me."

"Not the sort of person to take her own life, then?"

"Hardly." Winner smiled. "My wife take her own life, I hardly think so. . . . No . . . not a chance. She had everything to live for, i.e., my total ruin. She was poised to take half of what I possess, plus a massive amount of maintenance. She had a lot to live for. She and her sister had their knives out for me."

"So you really have benefited from her death? If it is she?"

"Oh yes, only the collapse of my business empire to worry about now. A minor headache by comparison. I make no secret of it. I have no feelings for my wife now. I haven't for a long time. I was angry about the possible divorce settlement because she wasn't very supportive of me while I was building up . . . more of a hindrance. I really did it despite her, not because of her."

"So, it's not true that behind every successful man there is a good woman?"

"Not in my case, it's not. Just isn't. I certainly could have used such a female in my life, but it wasn't my lot. I'd come home each day to a wife screaming for new clothes and no food. She would say that if I was hungry I could send out for a pizza. I went for her looks and found them skin deep and that the skin was covering a very ugly personality. I should have listened to my grandmother when she told me to shut my eyes and listen to the voice. 'Do your courting on the telephone,' she'd say. I should have listened."

"She sounds like a sensible woman."

"She was. She's still alive but her mind is away. I visit her when I can, but it's difficult to sit with a woman who once was full of such horse sense and wisdom who now thinks she's a little girl

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and doesn't recognise me. Keeps asking me if her daddy's going to come home from the war. Anyway, I'll claw my kit on, go and see the corpse. Never done this before. . . ." Winner stood.

"It's not like what you may have seen in the films. . . . She won't be pulled out of a drawer, you'll see her from behind a glass screen."

"It will be as if she is floating," added Pharoah.

It was in fact just as Carmen Pharoah had described. The woman floating on a bed, tightly tucked up. "It is she," said Max Winner. "That's my wife, Sadie Winner, aged forty-five years. Quite frankly, I don't know which one of us rests in peace."

Bill Hatch stood—a short, balding, rotund man with stubby fingers. He was the sort of man who would be found in a pigeon loft lovingly stroking his beloved birds, or perhaps reading a tabloid newspaper on the top deck of a bus, or downing pints of mild and bitter in a smoky pub. But he was, in fact, a Home Office pathologist. He examined the corpse of Sadie Winner in the pathology laboratory of the York District Hospital and said, "The police surgeon is quite correct. Even before I make the first and even slightest incision, I can tell you that she didn't drown."

"No?" Carmen Pharoah responded from the corner of the room from where she was observing the post mortem for the police.

"No." He ran his hands through Sadie Winner's scalp hair. "No, she was hit over the head. A single blow, feels like from behind. . . . We'll see." He took a scalpel and made an incision round the perimeter of the skull above the level of the ears and then peeled the scalp back and revealed the skull. "Yes . . . fractured skull . . . bleeding was internal . . . subdural hematoma . . . a single blow with a blunt object . . . caused a starlike fracturing. She also had a very thin skull. A person with a thicker skull might have survived this blow, but in her case, death would have been instantaneous."

Carmen Pharoah met Simon Markov, as arranged, for lunch in the town. Later they walked the walls back towards Friargate, the ancient city spreading out at either side beneath them. They walked in silence, enjoying each other's company, then Carmen Pharoah said, "If you had battered someone over the head, what would you do with the murder weapon?"

"Get rid of it."

"In the first convenient place?"

"Yes."

"Such as a canal, for instance?"

Markov smiled at her. "Yes, such as a canal, for instance."

"A job for the frog boys. We'll ask Ken Menninot to authorise it. Meanwhile, to matters of greater import." She slid her arm into his. "Tonight I thought we'd eat Chinese."

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"Can do, if you wish. In fact . . ." Markov paused and halted. "Look." He indicated towards the railway station below and across the road from where they stood on the battlements. "Isn't that Max Winner?"

"It is."

The two cops watched as Max Winner stood talking with a woman many, many years his junior. She was slender, ginger-haired, casually dressed. The woman suddenly stepped forwards and kissed him. Max Winner responded by holding her upper arms, but perfunctorily so. She was more interested in him than he was in her. Their body language said so.

Ken Menninot, Sergeant, C.I.D., listened to Pharoah's feedback of the P.M. and her theory about the discarding of the murder weapon. He authorised a small team of divers to search the canal beneath the bridge on which Sadie Winner's car had been located. The murder weapon revealed itself to have been a smooth rock, large enough to just fit in one hand, inside a woollen hiking sock. When swung, it would have made quite an impact, especially on an unusually thin skull.

Pharoah and Markov drove out to Winner's house.

"I thought I'd see you again," he said pleasantly. "Only not quite so soon." He stood at the entrance of his house. As he and the cops stood there, a woman bundled out of the house, elbowing him aside, carrying a cardboard box with her.

The woman stopped at the sight of Pharoah and Markov, both in plain clothes but both with the unmistakable stamp of police officers about them. She turned and yelled "Murderer!" at Winner. Then she stamped off to a small car and drove angrily away.

"My sister-in-law," Winner explained apologetically. "Won't you come in? Please."

On this occasion Winner received Pharoah and Markov in the sitting room of his house. The cops, reading the room, noted he had a taste for antiques—furniture, china, paintings. "The distress you just witnessed," he said, settling into a chair, "is due in part, I believe, to the fact that my ex-wife's sister believed that her money troubles would have been solved upon our divorce. My ex-wife's sister and her husband live a very hand-to-mouth existence. The car she had . . . I've never seen it before. She must have borrowed it. She certainly doesn't own one."

"I see."

"Tell you the truth, your arrival rescued me. But she'll be back, collecting Sadie's possessions and anything of mine I may be foolish enough to leave behind. In fact, she didn't make an attempt to remove all Sadie's possessions, gives her the excuse to come back."

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"You could leave them at the door."

"I could, couldn't I? That hadn't occurred to me." Winner smiled. "It is my house, after all, isn't it?"

"Mr. Winner," Markov said, "that young woman that you were speaking to outside the railway station this lunchtime—"

"You saw us?"

"We were up on the walls."

"I see. Yes . . . that was Julia. Another bane of my life. I don't really have a great deal of success with women—my ex . . . now Julia. Julia really was the start of all my troubles ten years ago now."

"Ten years?"

"Julia's older than she looks. She's in her late twenties."

"Really?"

"She acts and dresses like a teenager. I confess I worry about her, psychologically speaking. She's just not with us, it's as if she's on another planet."

"How did you meet?"

"She was an employee at the factory. A low-skilled job . . . a secretarial job, but she seemed to latch herself onto me . . . speak to me on any pretext . . . sending notes to my wife. Telling Sadie that she, Julia, and I were to be married. Really set the cat among the pigeons. My ex—my wife—call her my ex, but we were not divorced. I'll have to start calling her my late wife now—anyway, Sadie. Once that seed of suspicion grew, it grew to something mammoth. A bit like a mustard tree. A small seed grows into a huge tree. So we drifted apart and I had my affairs, but definitely not with little Miss Julia Patton, though she continued to shadow me."

"Do you know where she lives?"

"Tang Hall Estate, Two Cheviot Avenue. Seen the address often enough on the letters she has sent to me. Sorry, you are . . . ?"

"D.C.s Pharoah and Markov. In case you should want to contact us—you may need a contact person—we're working the six A.M. until two P.M. shift this week."

"Overtime, then." Winner glanced at the grandfather clock. It was two-thirty P.M.

"Par for the course," Markov said, smiling.

Pharoah and Markov drove back to York, through the city centre and out to Tang Hall: low-rise, unkempt gardens, houses with boarded-up windows, motorcycles fastened to lampposts with massive chains and padlocks, cars in driveways being "done up" prior to resale for a modest profit. Number 2 Cheviot Avenue fitted into the surrounding area, an overgrown garden and a pile of uncollected domestic refuse by the side door. The cops knocked at the

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front door. The sound of the knocker echoed within.

"I don't know why we are here," said Pharoah.

"Because we are," Markov replied. "We're here to find what we shall find, if anything."

The door was flung open and a woman with ginger hair and glazed blue eyes stood on the threshold. "Yes?"

"Julia Patton?"

"Aye." At close hand she did indeed look older than she did from a distance.

"Police."

An intake of breath. "Yes?"

"We understand that you know Mr. Winner? Mr. Max Winner?"

"Aye." She smiled. The name clearly triggered something and she said, "Winner by name, winner by nature."

"You know him well?"

"Very. Very well indeed."

"Where were you last night?"

"Here," she said. "At home."

"All night?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes." She adopted a more aggressive stance. "You can ask my neighbours. They'll tell you my light was on all night, go and ask them."

"You'll know Mrs. Winner?"

"The cow. Of course I know her. She tried to stop me and Max . . . but she couldn't. True love will find a way."

"You and Mr. Winner are in a relationship?"

"Yes . . . for years now."

"Do you hike?"

"What?"

"Walking . . . long walks in the country, do you do it?"

"No."

"You wouldn't have any hiking socks, then?"

Julia Patton blushed a deep red but recovered quickly and said, "No."

"Do you mind if we come in?"

"Why? There's nothing to see."

"Nothing to hide then, have you?" The cops stepped inside.

Julia Patton's house was threadbare and basic. Very basic. Worn-out chairs, no floor covering, and even at that time of the year, it had a chill about it. In the hallway Markov noted a pair of boots. Not hiking boots, but working boots, the sort that would have to be worn with thick socks over ordinary socks. He said, "I've got a pair of boots like that. Use them for gardening."

"Oh."

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"Have to wear hiking socks with them."

"I do, too. They wore out. I threw them out."

"They'll be in the refuse by the door?"

"No. Threw them out a long time ago."

Markov picked up one of the boots and examined the sole. The soil trapped on the side was slightly damp. "They've been worn recently?"

"Just in the garden. Don't need thick socks to go into the garden. Will that be all?"

Markov replaced the boot. "Yes. For now."

"Good. I've got plans to make."

"For?"

"My marriage. Max and I are getting married. Nothing to stop us now she's dead. Heard it on the lunchtime news. Haven't felt better for years."

That evening went as planned for Carmen Pharoah and Simon Markov; one recently arrived in York, the other settled but recently divorced, and now having found each other. They met outside the Minster and went on a Ghost Walk to satisfy Carmen Pharoah's curiosity, she having often seen such walks advertised. They joined a crowd of about fifty who were led around the city by an actor in Victorian dress who took them down the narrow, one-person-at-a-time snickleways, a street pattern within a street pattern, and who showed them the tall house where a hundred years previously a little girl had fallen to her death within, down the stairwell from the upper floor to the cellar, and who can sometimes be seen as she ascends the stairs for the last time. And they were shown the window where the most recently seen ghost in all England—about twenty sightings a year—is to be viewed; a little girl sobbing at a window. The story being that during the Black Death her parents noticed she had the symptoms of the plague and so locked her in her room and fled, not just the house, which they locked and left with the sign of the plague on the door, but York itself. Leaving their daughter to succumb to thirst, or starvation, or the plague. And they viewed the house where once a man had seen a column of Roman soldiers who were marching, as if on their knees, along the hallway of the house. Excavation revealed the house had been built on the site of a Roman road, the surface of which was two feet beneath the floor of the house.

"Lost something by doing the walk in summer," Markov said as he glanced at the menu in the Green Jade restaurant.

"We could do it again," replied Carmen, whose eye was caught by the Chicken Chow Mein. "A blustery winter's night, or Halloween. That would be fun."

They spent the night at her house, where she was still living

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largely out of bin liners and cardboard boxes. She had bought "within the walls," having been told that she would never have a problem selling her house if she bought "within the walls," and that night they lay together listening to the Minster bells chime midnight.

Max Winner woke early the next morning, as he did during the summer months, but he remained long in bed, still feeling a sense of whirring confusion in his head. The sense of weight having been lifted from his life was tangible . . . but yet, strangely, there was a loss, too. He was now finally alone in his house. She was no longer in her room. He didn't miss her, not at all, but there was a space, a hole where previously there was no hole. He didn't think her loss would have had such an effect on him, and it surprised him that it did.

He heard the doorbell ring. He levered himself out of bed, wound into his dressing gown, and went down the ancient creaking staircase and answered the door. He gasped in surprise and astonishment.

" 'Morning, Max," beamed Julia Patton. "Did you miss me?" She stood with two suitcases at her feet. "Nothing to stop us now, is there, Max?"

"No—no—" He said "no" because he didn't know what else to say. "Won't you come in?"

They sat in the sitting room where the day previously he had received Carmen Pharoah and Simon Markov. "I don't know what to say," he said.

"I knew you'd be pleased. I used to watch the house almost every evening . . . got to know her movements. . . . Waited for her on the bridge. I knew she'd stop and give me a mouthful . . . and she did. Then when she turned away to go back to her car, I hit her over the head. I had a rock inside a sock. She went down slowly. I tried to lift her over the parapet, but I couldn't, so I dragged her down some steps and put her in the water, facedown, dropped her handbag in after her and chucked the rock and sock in the water as well. So we can be together now, Max. I can be lady of this house."

"Yes . . ." He smiled. "Yes . . . have you breakfasted yet?"

"No. I came straight here. The police called yesterday but I got rid of them, they won't be back. Just you and me now, Max."

Max Winner stood. "Well, look, why don't you make yourself at home."

"At home," she echoed.

"I'll go and get my clothes on and I'll make us both something to eat." He left the room and walked back up the stairs to his bedroom. He closed the door behind him and picked up the telephone by his bed. "D.C. Pharoah or Markov," he said when his call was answered. "Either will do." ●

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Farber and the Tuesday Lover

by Gordon Cotler

Over the years Gordon Cotler's writerly pursuits have included short stories, novels, and scripts for movies and TV. Many of our readers will have seen some of his work on TV: He wrote the pilot scripts for series based on *Friday the Rabbi Slept Late*, *Father Brown*, and *Murder Ink*. The movie *Arabesque* (frequently on cable) was based on his novel *The Cipher*. These days he writes only Farber stories. †

The Starcrest was a good two cuts above being a hotbed motel. True, its location on the far West Side of Manhattan made it a less desirable venue for tourists who needed easy access to Midtown theaters and shopping, but for the budget-minded traveler the trade-off made sense. The building, though out of fashion at nearly fifty years of age, was solidly built and comfortable. Probably less than twenty percent of its clientele consisted of couples looking for a few hours of discreet bliss, and the place looked too stodgily middle-class to attract a druggy element. No crime or scandal had ever been attached to the Starcrest.

Until tonight.

Lieutenant Bernie Farber rarely worked cases hands-on. As supervisor of all homicide investigations on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, his plate was full. But Detective Paul Mancuso's partner had fallen violently ill, apparently of food poisoning, on their way to this crime scene, and Mancuso had called Farber at home when nobody else was immediately available. "It's just for tonight," Farber explained to his wife as he went to the hall closet for his coat. "Ed Brot will bounce back in the morning. Why don't you reschedule us for tomorrow?"

Farber was referring to the bridge game Sylvie had arranged for this evening with her brother and his wife. But as keen as she was for bridge, Sylvie was in no hurry to attempt a new date with Mark. Long experience had taught her that if this case interested him Bernie would not give it up even if it meant having to re-poison Brot. "Try not to be back too late," she said through tight lips. "The

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temperature's dropping like a stone." Farber was forty-seven, but Sylvie sometimes treated him as though he was seventy-seven.

The body was in Room 178 at the Starcrest, towards the far end of the long two-story structure. The crime-scene unit was working full tilt, and Farber had to peer in from the doorway with Mancuso at his shoulder. The victim lay on his back on the floor near the door. He was a compact man of perhaps fifty with small, regular, almost mousy features and a saucy pencil moustache that seemed entirely incongruous. He was dressed in a shirt and the trousers of a business suit. The jacket and a necktie were draped over the back of the one chair in the room. A tidy scene except for the considerable pool of blood that spread from the victim's neck. A trickle under the door had attracted the night maid.

"A single stab wound apparently severed the carotid artery," Mancuso said. "The A.M.E. said the weapon could be something like a serrated steak knife, but they'll have to get him up on the table to know for sure. The only sign we've found that anyone else was in the room is the faint smell of a heavy perfume. You catching it?"

"Definitely. Could be from a previous occupant," Farber said. "Any luggage?"

"No luggage, no nothing. He's registered as Alan Brown, but his wallet says he's Henry Haven of an address on Riverside Drive about a mile north. If he needed a toothbrush, he could have walked home for it."

"Let's talk to the room clerk."

The front desk was at the other end of the block-long corridor. The clerk was a sallow young man with a shock of untamed red hair, a single earring, wire-rimmed eyeglasses, and a chip on his shoulder. He had been waiting for them, and he stuck a finger in the textbook he was reading to mark his place.

"This isn't exactly a career job," he began defensively. "I'm a grad student trying to make next year's tuition. I'm here Monday to Friday, six to two. You want the manager. He'll be in at eight A.M."

"Take it easy, son, nobody's accused you of anything," Mancuso growled. "Let's see Mr. Brown's registration card."

"You won't learn anything from this," the clerk said, handing it over.

He was right. All the card said was, "Alan Brown. Cleveland, Ohio." Mancuso looked up. "That's all you ask for?"

"When they pay up front, in cash? You bet. Hey, I don't make the rules. Anyway, this guy's a regular. Every Tuesday as long as I've been here, nearly a year. Checks in around seven, stays just the one night."

"Does his business in town and scoots back to Cleveland, is that it?"

Tight-lipped: "Knowing what the customer does and where he

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does it is not in my job description."

"Does Mrs. Brown come in with him from Cleveland?"

The clerk was unfazed. "She might. We rent by the room, not the person." Easing off a bit: "He asks for a room at the far end of the building. Once you have a room key you can open the street door back there and unload your bags from a taxi. Saves a lot of lugging."

"And the bother of walking past the desk. So you never saw Mrs. Brown with him?"

"Or anyone else."

Mancuso's frustration was showing, and Farber took over. "You dealt with this man for a year. What was he like? What did he have to say?"

"He wasn't a talker. He said pretty much the same thing every week. 'It'll be just the one night. You know my room preference.' And when I gave him the key, 'Thank you. Good night.' That was about it."

"Any idea what time he left?"

"None. The room was his till eleven A.M. Wednesday morning. Or any portion thereof."

"You know something?" Mancuso growled. "You've been of practically no help whatsoever."

"I figured as much," said the clerk.

"Anyway, don't leave town without letting me know."

"Don't worry, I can't afford to leave town."

It was nearly eleven P.M. by the time Mancuso rang the bell of the Henry Haven apartment on Riverside Drive. Farber said, "Let me take the lead."

After a long minute the door was opened on a chain. An Irish setter poked into the opening and a woman peered out. She was about fifty, with a leathery face and a large nose that seemed to have a life of its own. She had thrown a robe over a nightgown and looked half-asleep. Farber flashed his ID, said, "Police, ma'am," and she quickly slipped the chain.

"Oh my God. Is it my husband? Has something happened to Henry?" She flung the door wide and the two cops walked in, their faces properly grave.

They made sure the widow was seated in the heavily draped, airless living room before they gave her the news. She accepted with growing horror that her husband was dead and that he had been murdered. What took her awhile to get was that his body lay in a motel room in the far West Fifties. Farber had to come at this fact from several directions.

At one point she said, "You mean he was wounded in the street and carried to the motel to wait for an ambulance?"

Eventually the truth was hammered into her, if gentle persistence can be described as hammering. As the truth was revealed,

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she turned stone cold and drew her feelings behind a curtain. In a voice now impersonal and remote she asked, "Was he killed by an individual who was with him in the motel room?"

"That's what we're trying to find out." Farber squirmed in his seat. "Do you have any idea who that might have been?"

"Not," she said, and the nose flared, "in the slightest."

"Where was your husband supposed to be this evening?"

"Where he is every Tuesday, playing racquetball at his club. He is a creature of habit. A group of men have dinner afterwards and a drink or two. He sometimes gets in late."

"And how long has he had this Tuesday-night routine?"

"About a year. Once Paddy was trained. That was a miracle." She had become more animated. "Six lessons and we had a completely new dog. What a joy." Meaning, at the moment, the dog at least was alive. He lay at her feet and she scratched his ear and ruffled his fur. "Henry said now that Paddy was civilized, he'd be a companion to me and he wouldn't feel guilty about taking up racquetball. He began the very next Tuesday and, my goodness, those sessions worked wonders. He seemed ten years younger." She paused to blot a tear near the tip of her expressive nose.

Farber said, "And the dog was trained at . . . ?"

"The Canine's Companion. Somewhere in the Thirties. Henry would know." Her eyes sprung wide and she dabbed at another tear. "Oh my."

"There's usually a price to be paid for adultery," Sylvie Farber said in a satisfied voice. Bernie had come in last night after she was asleep and she was catching up on his evening at breakfast. "Lie down with dogs and you get up with fleas."

Bernie wondered if there was a personal message here, no matter how unneeded it might be. "That poor guy never got to lie down," he said. "He barely had his tie off when he took the knife in the neck."

"Whatever."

Sylvie eased towards her bridge agenda. "It doesn't sound like a challenging case, Bern. Pick up the woman and that's that. *Cherchez la bimbo.* I suppose Mancuso and Brot will handle it. How's Brot's stomach, by the way? All cleared up?"

"I haven't had a chance to find out. It's only twenty to seven. And what do you mean, 'Pick up the woman'? We don't have the slightest idea who she is. The victim was a stock trader. Sat in a closet of an office all day staring at a computer screen. Who knows where or how he met this woman? Mancuso's checking with Forensics this morning, see what they turned up."

"While you . . . ?" There went the bridge game.

"You were close," Bernie said. "I'm going to see a man about a dog."

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Mr. Benno Creamer, proprietor of The Canine's Companion, was a pint-sized man, balding, with the dewlaps of an English bulldog. A walking advertisement for his trade.

"I don't use the words *train* or *training* in my classes," he corrected Farber when they met in his loft/classroom over a hardware store in the West Twenties. "My focus is on helping the canine and human partners tune in to each other's needs. I think of it as a kind of marriage counseling. Sessions are individual or group, depending on need and pocketbook. So, do you and your canine companion have some knots to untangle?"

Farber fumbled open his ID. "No, no, sorry. Lieutenant Farber, NYPD. On official business. You had a client about a year ago, Henry Haven?"

Creamer's dewlaps shrunk. "I'm sorry, humans' names don't resonate with me."

"Would you remember Paddy? An Irish setter?"

Creamer took hardly a beat. "Paddy, of course. A most amiable companion. He got what we were after very quickly."

"In a class?"

"Oh yes. Where he stood out. A most social creature."

"Would you remember if his master—"

"I don't recognize *masters*. We speak of companions here."

"Did Paddy's human companion—Strike that. Did Paddy make friends with any of the other dogs?"

"Most certainly. As I indicated, he was, well, gregarious."

"In particular—"

"He was especially chummy, I remember, with a spunky golden retriever, Hector. They spent quite a bit of time together, and now I recall that, yes, the friendship extended as well to their human companions. An unforeseen but rewarding consequence of my philosophy. Is that what you're looking for? Because, now that I think of it, Hector's companion had hair that almost matched the color of Hector's coat."

"A female companion?"

"What do you think? A do-it-yourself blonde. Wearing a perfume that unsettled the smaller dogs. I'll have her name and address in my files."

Farber hated going out of town—and to Farber, Yankee Stadium was out of town. There was Manhattan and there was the rest of the world, which included the boroughs. And of all the boroughs the one that pained him even more than the Bronx was Queens. Yet here he was, with Mancuso at the wheel, driving through a wasteland of private homes looking for one of those Queens addresses with more numbers than an overseas phone call. "You didn't have to come, Lieutenant," Mancuso said in response to the

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grumbling from the passenger seat. "Brot's ready for duty."

"I told him to take another day," was the dismissive response. And then, "Hey, this is the street." It was a curved street of large but identical houses crowded shoulder to shoulder in a semicircle, like elephants at the watering hole. "That must be it, the third on the left," Farber said. "With the golden retriever tied to the porch."

The dog watched them warily but with respect as they parked in the driveway, climbed the front stairs, and rang the bell. Nobody answered. A woman within spitting distance in the adjoining driveway said, "She's gone to pick up her kids. She won't be long."

A moment later, a late-model sedan pulled into the driveway and two children, maybe six and eight, tumbled out clutching their backpacks. They raced onto the porch, roughed up the patient dog, and dived into the house without so much as a glance at the detectives.

Their mother took a moment before she climbed out of the car tugging her skirt down. She knew her callers weren't selling aluminum siding. A shapely woman of forty with delicate features, and hair, as promised, the color of her dog, she approached them looking pale and grim and with a single word: "Yes . . . ?"

Farber said quietly (the woman in the next driveway had practically fallen into her rosebush trying to overhear), "Police, Mrs. Plummer. Okay if we talk inside?"

She nodded gravely, and a moment later they were in a chintz-covered living room, the children nowhere in sight, and Farber was introducing himself and Mancuso and showing his ID.

He said, "Do you know why we're here, Mrs. Plummer?"

Barely whispered: "No."

"I thought you might have seen the story in this morning's papers. Are you acquainted with a man named Henry Haven?"

Shaking her head vigorously: "No."

"Did you train your dog at The Canine's Companion?"

"Oh." Her blue eyes sprang wide and met his for the first time. "Yes. Isn't that Paddy's companion?" She had earned herself a D-minus in Surprise 101. "Of course, that was his name." There was a tremor in the soft voice. The trim body in the floral-print chair remained rigid.

"Sad news, I'm afraid. We're investigating his murder."

"Oh! That's terrible."

"Yes. Is there anything you can tell us that might help?"

"No. Why should there be? That class was nearly a year ago."

"We're interviewing Mr. Haven's contacts over the past year. Would you mind telling us if you were at home last night?"

"Last night? I had a sitter. I was at the movies."

"Do you and Mr. Plummer often go to the movies on Tuesdays?"

"There is no Mr. Plummer. I mean, there is, but he hasn't lived here for two years."

"And on Tuesday nights . . . ?"

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"I have a regular arrangement with a sitter. Now would you please leave?" Bravely: "I don't have to answer questions from you or anyone else."

"That's true, you don't. I'm sorry to have bothered you." He and Mancuso had remained standing, and now they moved slowly towards the front hall. Farber stopped and turned and Mancuso waited for him in the doorway. Farber said, as though it was an afterthought, "Oh, Mrs. Plummer. When the police forensics experts finish sorting out the fingerprints they found at the murder scene, we may ask for your cooperation again."

At this, the woman emitted a loud gasp, drew herself into a tight bundle against her chair back, and wept into the chintz hydrangeas. After a bit the sobbing stopped and she looked up and said softly, "I didn't kill him."

"Mrs. Plummer, I must warn you that anything you say to us may be used against you in a court of law. You may want to speak to a lawyer."

"No, I'm living a nightmare. I want to get this off my chest."

"You were with Mr. Haven last night?"

"It would be better if I start from the beginning." She gripped the arms of her chair; a sort of reality check. "Yes, I met Henry at the dog place last year. And yes, we drifted into an affair. It turned out not to be a casual one. We fell in love. I was in the midst of a horrible divorce and Henry had a wife who was dying of cancer. I suppose we filled a need in each other."

"I can see that, yes."

"I don't know how I'd have gotten through these last months without Henry. And he . . . well, his wife has at most a month or two to live."

"You met every Tuesday night?"

"Yes. Henry didn't trust the night nurse to be alone with his wife more than once a week. And I had to be careful, because my ex is looking for any excuse to get custody of the children. Not that he gives a damn for them, but only to hurt me."

She took a moment to compose herself. "We would meet at six at Connors—the restaurant in Times Square? We always beat the pre-theater crowd. By seven or a bit after we had walked to the motel. It was all very discreet."

"Dinner at a huge restaurant like Connors?"

"Neither of us knows anyone who would eat at a Times Square steakhouse. And Henry loved their steaks."

"And last night?"

Her eyes welled with fresh tears. "The same routine. Dinner and a walk to the motel. We had barely been in the room five minutes . . ." She had to stop again.

"Yes?" Farber prompted gently.

"There was a knock on the door. I immediately went into the

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bathroom and closed the door. I heard Henry say, 'What is it?'"

She took another moment. "I couldn't hear the answer—it came through two doors—but then Henry mumbled something and unlocked the door. And almost at once he cried out."

"In surprise?"

"Or in pain. I couldn't tell. But a few seconds later I heard a thud, like a body falling. I was terrified. What could I do? I waited a minute, listening, but I heard nothing more. So I came out of the bathroom. There was so much blood! And Henry was dead, I could see that. I grabbed my purse and fled. I suppose I should have called the police, done something, but I was thinking of my children, the mess, and I just got out of there." She looked at Farber. She had said all she had to say.

"The voice at the door. Was it male or female?"

"I'm not sure, it was so faint. Female, I think." She was crying again. "We were going to be married. As soon as . . . As soon as . . ."

"As soon as his wife died?"

Through her tears she nodded vigorously.

"What do you think?" Farber asked as they began the long drive back to Manhattan.

Mancuso was ready. "Same as you. The mystery knife-wielder knocking on that motel door is so much bull. What else could Mrs. Plummer say? She must have found out—maybe at dinner—that Henry's wife is healthy as a horse. I figure she doesn't like long goodbyes, so she smuggled a steak knife from the restaurant and ended the relationship without a lot of arguing. Henry must have been stupid or drunk not to see the weapon coming."

"If Mrs. Plummer knifed him, he wouldn't have seen it. She'd have had to stand at his back to stab him in the left side of the neck. You may have noticed she's left-handed."

Flushing, Mancuso mumbled, "Not really. But yeah, that explains it. A jab from behind."

"The autopsy may tell us, but it's a likelier story than the murderer at the motel door."

"Especially since the kid at the desk—I really hate that kid—didn't mention anybody strange, anybody who didn't belong, walking back through the lobby after Henry Haven."

"The Dallas Cowgirls could have pranced through that lobby and the kid wouldn't have lifted his nose from his book," Farber said.

"Then you think maybe someone else did come through . . . ?"

"No, my money's on Mrs. Plummer. And she shouldn't be hard to nail."

"Right. She's likely ditched the knife by now, but we may turn up the clothes she wore last night. Henry spilled a gallon of blood. I'll try for a search warrant."

"You do that, Paul." He hated to say it: "You and Brot can wrap

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this up. I'd better get back to the office and see what they've piled on my desk." Peering through the windshield, "I mean, if we can find our way out of Queens."

But Farber didn't go back to the office. He had Mancuso drop him on Riverside Drive in front of Henry Haven's apartment house.

"Just to touch base," he explained.

The widow Haven was red-eyed from crying, but she seemed pleased to see him. "Can you help me, Lieutenant?" she said as her dog checked out Farber in the foyer. "The medical examiner's office won't tell me when they'll release the body. How can I arrange for a funeral, let people know when it is, if I don't know when I'm getting my Henry back? Do you have any influence down there?"

"I'll be glad to make inquiries for you, Mrs. Haven. But they're not likely to keep him much longer."

Her eloquent nose quivered in anticipation. "Oh! Then you know who killed my husband."

"Not yet, but we're definitely making progress." Scratching Paddy's ear, he shifted gears noisily. "Mrs. Haven, did your husband by any chance call you last night? Did you talk to him at all?"

She looked surprised. "No, he never calls on his racquetball nights. There's no phone in the club gym. Oh dear, but he wasn't playing racquetball, was he?"

"Not last night, no. Might he have phoned you while you were out?"

"I was home all evening. I never went out."

"Not even to walk the dog?"

"Paddy," she snapped. "Yes. But that's not 'out,' that's walking the dog. I'm usually gone less than ten minutes."

"And last night?"

"Maybe a bit longer. The evening was mild and I let him romp in Riverside Park for a few minutes. I don't clock our excursions." An edge crept into her voice. "You might ask the night doorman."

"I may. Please excuse my questions. I have to touch every base."

"Apparently." She was bristling. "Did you think I killed my husband? I never heard of such a thing."

"Take my word, it happens. But I'm finished here, Mrs. Haven. Please accept my condolences. I won't bother you anymore." He turned towards the door.

"And you will let me know about the return of the body? So I can inform the relatives. And, of course, the chess club."

"The chess club?"

"The Madison Chess Club. Henry had many friends there. He was devoted to the game. He didn't miss a Thursday night in God knows how many years."

The Madison Chess Club occupied a three-room apartment in a

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high-rise in the East Seventies. The living room was furnished with half a dozen chess tables, two of them in use. The bedroom, beyond, and crowded with furniture, was evidently the residence of the rotund director, owner, whatever, one George Pelly. Farber introduced himself as a detective investigating a homicide and Mr. Pelly invited him back to the bedroom, which he called "the office." Not one player so much as glanced up from his board.

Mr. Pelly closed the door. "So as not to disturb the players," he said. "I don't even allow phone calls."

Farber got right to the point. "You have a member named Henry Haven?"

"I thought that might be what this is about. I saw the paper this morning. Very sad, although Haven was not much better than a *potzer.*"

"He played here on Thursday nights?"

"Yes, but not for two years and three months."

"You remember that off the top of your head?"

"Yes, because he quit the same week as Doris Mayron. Our one female member and a breath of spring, whatever the season. *She* was a real loss."

"You're home early," Sylvie said, stepping out of the kitchen to greet her husband. She seemed surprised to see him. "Brot must be back on the job."

"As a matter of fact, he reported in this afternoon," Farber said.

"Then you solved the motel murder. You'd have kept him home if you hadn't."

"Sylvie, you can't be too careful with food poisoning. But yes," Farber admitted, "we did make an arrest."

"Congratulations. So was the cheating husband done in by his Tuesday-night lover?"

"As a matter of fact it was his *Thursday*-night lover, name of Doris Mayron. They had been meeting at her apartment for nearly three years, waiting for his 'sick wife' to die so they could be married."

"What a slimeball."

"Doris was in Times Square buying theater tickets when she spotted Henry and Mrs. Tuesday coming out of a restaurant. Unfortunately for Henry, Doris had just purchased a set of steak knives from one of those Times Square stores with a permanent 'Going Out of Business' sign in the window."

Sylvie was steaming. "That contemptible worm ruined the lives of two apparently decent women."

"Or more. Mancuso turned up the curious fact that while Henry was supposed to have been jogging in Central Park on Sunday afternoons for the past three months, his running shoes looked brand-new." ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

IMITATE THE SUN

by Luke Sholer

Tokyo. This is where it started and this is where it ends. The elevators ring faintly as they rise and fall in the shafts.

This Akasaka hotel room. I can still see the oil mark where you rested your forehead on the glass. You stood there confessing for two nights straight while forty-two stories below, limousines and taxis drew patterns on the street.

But now, the third night, I'm only watching for one car. The long black one we saw Kumi tumble lifeless out of. Long and black and old, like the cars generals used in World War II.

And from the bathroom, moments ago, came a gunshot.

The elevators ring faintly, going up and down the shafts. Any minute those doors will slide open on the forty-second floor.

They will be coming for you.

But you, you're already gone. You're already someone else.

Madrid, several months ago. I saw them, back under the porticoes, but pretended I didn't.

I went on spraying the cobblestones of the Plaza Mayor. When I looked again they were gone. I tilted the nozzle back. The water punched in an arc and washed ringing down the lamppost.

I finished my shift and headed home. The sun was rising on a Madrid that had been rinsed new, like a miracle, in the night.

They were on the sidewalk outside my building. Four, in identical black suits. Four Japanese men.

Luke Sholer is a published poet who studied in the creative writing programs at the University of Arizona and Johns Hopkins University. He currently lives in Spain, where he teaches English. His first short story is a thriller with multiple foreign settings—all of which are beautifully rendered. Right on the heels of this publication, a Sholer story will appear in *Crimewave* (UK). †

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"Major Inman," said the one in front. His red silk tie matched his red silk handkerchief. He had sharpened fingernails.

At first I didn't react. It had been over a year since anyone addressed me in English.

"Major Inman," he repeated. "We would appreciate a moment with you."

I led them into my living room. The other three stood back as the man with the fingernails sat with me. He mentioned Tokyo, grieving families, an unpunished criminal.

"As you can imagine, Major, the families—"

"Don't call me that. I'm not in the service anymore."

"Ah, I had forgotten. You are a street cleaner now." He smiled. "The night shift."

I twisted my wedding band, said nothing.

"The families need to put this to rest. You find the criminal, return him to Japan. Then—" he caged his palms as though trapping a fly "—there can be justice."

"Why don't you try the police?"

"This," he said, "is a personal affair. As much for us as for you."

"This has nothing to do with me."

"Do you like being a widower, Major Inman?"

I got up. I was about to throw them out.

Then he talked about death on the Tokyo subway, and about you.

I told him I had to think it over.

By night I worked in Old Madrid, spraying down the cobblestones and columns, pressure-blasting posters off the walls. It was calming, repetitive. The waterproof suit swished as I moved.

But by day, insomnia. I lay half-dressed in the bed my wife had never slept in, in an apartment she had never even seen, and thought of that morning on the Tokyo subway.

It was spring, 1995. I'd been granted two weeks' leave. We went to Tokyo on our second honeymoon.

The morning of March 20, 1995. Five members of the terrorist cult Aum Shinrikyo released sarin nerve gas on Tokyo's rush-hour trains.

That morning she got up early; she was going to observe the cherry blossoms before the parks got crowded. I slept in.

She died alone.

At St. Luke's International Hospital, surrounded by people vomiting and screaming in a language she didn't understand.

Cardiopulmonary arrest, the doctor said.

Sarin gas. Before that I didn't even know it existed.

Seven years passed.

Then the man with the sharpened fingernails came. He explained: Your role was crucial. Without you, Aum Shinrikyo

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never would've pulled off the attack.

I'd thought it was behind me, but it wasn't.

I couldn't sleep.

I saw her body in the hospital bed, her name omitted from all the newspapers. I thought of the people who had taken her from me. I thought of you.

This, every day, for a week.

Then I told him yes. I would hunt you.

We were at the Universidad Complutense rugby fields. I went there often in the afternoons, when I was waking up. It was good to drink coffee from the snack bar while the men in white shorts collapsed in piles.

This time the tie and handkerchief were lime green. His fingernails were still sharpened.

He was explaining: After the attack you went missing. You hadn't been back to Japan since. Meanwhile you'd lived everywhere, been a dozen different people. You even spent a few years in the States. Once near my hometown.

"If you knew that, why didn't you go after him?"

"Because we didn't know. Not then. We hadn't made our contact yet."

One team advanced on the field, each player shunting the ball behind him.

He continued: Madrid was the last place you'd been. They'd come to catch you themselves, but they were too late. You'd already changed identities, fled.

"Where to?" I asked.

"La Paz, Bolivia."

I thought cocaine fields, revolutionaries.

"No," he said. "He'll be making his money a different way. An invisible way."

"Meaning?"

"He specializes in passports, fraudulent identities."

"And when I find him?"

"If you try to bring him back to Tokyo, he'll struggle. So you will disguise your purpose. You will tell him his father is very sick, on the verge of dying. His last wish is to see his son."

"And why will he buy that?"

"Because it's true."

La Paz, then.

I quit my job and my plane touched down at El Alto International.

I left my suitcase at a hotel on the Calle Loayza, asked the concierge for a map, and walked.

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I walked all day.

And saw: a sky cluttered with electrical lines and sun-bleached signs, disintegrating sidewalks, grim bars with only men in them, Indian women in bowler hats and layered skirts, street vendors amid stacks of colorful wool, gutters lined with refuse, infants' faces caked in saliva and dirt. And in the background, giant and white, the triple peaks of Illimani.

I would give you time. I would survey the city, follow the black-market goods. I would learn the playing field.

Then engage you.

But that first afternoon it hit me.

On the Avenida 16 de Julio, in the snarl of cars and trucks trailing paper streamers, I started hyperventilating and sat dizzy on the sidewalk coning my hands over my mouth as horns and catcalls shrieked all around me.

Soroche, the Bolivians call it. Altitude sickness.

My whole body felt as if it was suffocating. The vomiting and diarrhea chained me to my hotel room. At night I watched the high plaster ceiling.

I could do nothing but rest and drink coca-leaf tea.

I was losing ground.

You took my wife and even my vengeance from me.

My silhouette on the dark glass. Beyond it, red lights wink on the skyscrapers. It's so the helicopters don't slap into them, you said.

This Akasaka hotel room. We spent two nights holed up in Tokyo luxury. Floor-to-ceiling windows, down quilts, teak hangers from the Cambodian rain forest.

That one sudden shot behind the bathroom door. I didn't see it coming. He just went in. I didn't even know he had a gun.

The elevators chime as they rise and fall in the shafts. You're gone now.

But for two nights you stood here, overlooking the city you spent seven years running from. You against the glass, explaining.

"It was Kumi," you said. "She was the start."

You met her at a stand-up noodle bar in the Shinjuku district. You looked like you'd walked straight out of a music video. So did she: pink hair, a camouflage wristband. She wasn't even eating. She just leaned on the metal counter, ignoring even the cigarette between her fingers.

You made eye contact, thought once, then went over. She acted as if you weren't there. You stole the cigarette from her and inhaled as the elevated train scraped a long curve overhead.

You mouthed something in the roar.

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"What?" she said.

"Do you know anything fun to do around here?"

She waited for the train to pass.

"You don't look like you need my help to find fun."

You grinned; then stopped. "How's your luck?"

"Alarming," she said, snatching the cigarette back. The tip hissed orange. "I always win."

Your eyes locked with hers.

"Let's go," you said.

And you went. To a pachinko parlor in East Shinjuku. You were gambling, both of you, with your money, giddy like winners of a shopping spree. You sank it into the machines until nothing was left.

"Come here," she said, slipping her hands into your jeans. You trembled; you were close enough to bite her. She pulled the last coin out.

"That's for the subway home."

"No, it's not," she said.

And she put it in and slammed the button and the shower of coins that followed clinked throughout the parlor for several minutes straight.

"Here." She handed you one from the overflowing tray. "For the subway."

Then she wrote ten numbers on a napkin. "Ask for Kumi."

El Mercado Negro.

Anything undocumented, anything stolen or bootlegged, can be found in La Paz's black market. Including identities. When I got better, it was the first place I went.

In stalls and on the sidewalk people were selling mobile phones, tin pots, dubious Levi's, bright crumbling pigments, Japanese film, cassettes with photocopied covers, imitation French handbags.

A mestizo vendor who recognized that I spoke with a Castilian accent said, *"Tengo algo que le puede interesar."** He led me down an alley to a dim workshop and in the back room unstrung a pouch full of sixteenth-century colonial coins. They were large and silver; the edges were wobbly.

"Straight from the mines at Potosí," he said. "There was enough silver there to underwrite the Spanish economy for two hundred years."

I held all that forced labor and rape and history in my hand.

And traded him a fan of U.S. dollars for two colonial coins.

"Maybe you can help me with something else," I said.

He couldn't, but he knew who could. He led me back through the market to a man sitting in a folding chair.

"He wants a passport," my vendor said.

*"I have something that may interest you."

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The man nodded. He had the letter *S* tattooed on his neck. "What kind?"

"Canadian," I said. At that time a Canadian passport was the most coveted: It raised the fewest suspicions and had the friendliest visa agreements. With it you could travel, and get residence, almost anywhere.

He clucked, shook his head. "Nobody has one."

I told him what I was willing to pay.

"My name is Santi." He wrote down a phone number. "This guy doesn't have any, but he knows someone who does. A new kid. Japanese."

I went to an Entel phone booth.

An Indian woman squatted on the sidewalk in front of me. Her multiple skirts ruffled out around her like a hen. She got up, leaving a puddle.

"Dígame," said a man on the fourth ring.

"Buenas tardes. Santi said you know about Canadian passports."

"No sé nada."

"That's a pity," I said. "Because my friend lost his."

He didn't respond.

"He needs a new one. And if he likes it, he'll need twenty more."

I could hear nothing but the line static.

"De acuerdo," he finally said. "I know somebody. He'll meet you on the Calle Sagárnaga tomorrow at noon. Be drinking a lemon Fanta."

Back in my hotel on the Calle Loayza. A crack as faint as a spider strand ran across the high plaster ceiling. On the nightstand, under the handcuffs and the gun, were pictures of you.

I closed my eyes and tried to see my wife. Tried to see her sleeping, her hair dark and flowing as a diver's. Tried to see the weekends we spent in Sevilla, her on tiptoes pulling oranges off the trees. I tried, even, to see her in Tokyo, collapsing as she stepped off the subway. Then at St. Luke's, not responding to CPR, her pupils shrunken with nerve gas.

But I only saw your face.

Only saw those pictures of you.

The man with the sharpened fingernails gave me an assortment, all of them old, from when you still lived in Japan. There was one from a yearbook. You went to Tokyo's best international school, where you learned flawless English. You're wearing a blazer, your hair is parted. Each student says what he wants to be as an adult. There are surgeons, diplomats. You put "street magician."

And he also gave me the terms.

He said: *Justice can be a delicate matter, Major Inman, and so you have a choice. You may hand him over to us in Tokyo, or you*

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may send us clear proof of his death. Upon completion of either condition, you will receive the second half of your payment.

And I said yes.

Because I could let your countrymen judge you. Or I could leave you nameless and dead in a foreign country.

The way you left my wife.

When I saw you the next day on the Calle Sagárnaga I would decide.

In the beginning you lived with your parents and so did she. Which meant you had nowhere to yourselves. Nowhere except the love hotels of Kabuki-cho or Dogenzaka. How many afternoons spent in spotless rooms you would never return to? Just two or three hours at a time, the length of a film.

You remember one afternoon in particular; you described it several times. Everything was sky blue: the jacuzzi, the comforter, the curtains. That, and the white carpet. Like a model home, a place people could visit but never live in.

She was sitting cross-legged, sheets up to her navel. Everything else was bare.

"When I was a girl," she said, blowing out smoke, "I used to roller-skate."

You were in the bathroom, washing your genitals in the sky-blue sink. "Could you do any tricks?"

"I could jump." She inhaled and thought for a second. "They were professional skates."

You suddenly thought she was lying. You watched her in the mirror.

She was caressing her arm. "I used to be left-handed."

"What?"

"We were in the park, it was Sunday."

You moved to the doorway.

"I was skating backwards around my parents. I wanted to impress them. There must have been a pebble, a twig. Suddenly I was falling. Backwards. My head was going to crack open. That's all I saw: my head cracking open like a purse being dumped out."

"But you didn't—"

"My father caught me just in time. By the arm," she said, still caressing her left arm. "And tore it out of its socket. I started screaming. He slapped me."

She eyed you, removing the cigarette from her lips.

"I saved you, he said. *You should be grateful."*

You knelt naked on the bed.

"They put it in a sling. After that I did everything right-handed."

You knocked her back. The lit cigarette fell onto the sheets.

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"That's what men do," she said. "Save you and hurt you at the same time."

And you devoured her neck as the smell of burning linen filled the room.

The Calle Sagárnaga is the Artisans' Market.

I arrived early. I had the handcuffs in the small of my back, the gun in my coat pocket.

Stands and shops, vivid shawls and blankets. Indian women knelt weaving on heddle looms, spinning wool with drop spindles. From beneath their bowler hats hung long black braids.

I was supposed to be drinking a lemon Fanta, that's how you'd recognize me. But that's not what I wanted.

I moved past a stand, pushing the embossed leather purses out of my eyes.

And saw: you, among the craftsmen and tourists, hair disheveled, wearing a black duffel coat. You walked slowly, your head at a tilt, musing.

The gun was in my pocket.

But something wasn't right.

You were young, too young. More like a student than a terrorist.

I loosened my grip and turned around. I picked up a wool blanket, feeling the weave.

"It's typical of the Jalq'a region," the woman said, indicating the black and magenta bands. I nodded, sensing you pass behind me.

You entered a music shop displaying pan flutes and charangos made from armadillo carapaces. You complimented the craftsman. I clenched the gun, and saw my wife up to her stomach in the Mediterranean. She smiled, glistening, and I was thinking: The sea changes a woman, it rinses away the years and compromises, it shows her as she wants to be.

You came out of the shop.

I could have shot you then, but I never would've got any closer. I never would've learned more.

I let the gun fall loose in my pocket.

And shadowed you, your black head bobbing on the river of black heads, all the way down the Calle Sagárnaga.

I followed you all over the city.

First to a Banco Sol branch office, where you spoke to a manager but made no transaction.

Next, up into the canyon-rim slums of El Alto, where naked children played tag around the potholes and their mothers pounded laundry in streams, carefully avoiding the feces. At an auto-repair shop you spoke to a waiting group of Indians, passed them envelopes, and shook their hands.

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Then back down the steep dirt streets of El Alto into the lower city, to your apartment on the Calle Indaburo.

You spent entire days with the Indians in El Alto. Entire days out.

The doorman of your building had the curved back and tiny hands of a watchmaker. His pocket was full of keys. I passed him some American bills and he escorted me up the stairwell.

Yours was a studio with only one window. The shutters were drawn.

I touched the light switch.

Laid out like a card game on your desk were dozens of *cédulas de identidad*—Bolivian national ID cards. There was a stack of papers to go with each name: credit histories, bills, pay slips.

But that wasn't what caught my eye.

Scattered on your bed, in a kind of puzzle, lay hundreds of pictures of you and Kumi. Phoenix, Miami, San Francisco, Bucharest, Madrid. All the cities where you ran your scams, your Cayman Island accounts growing ever vaster. Your goal was to retire at thirty, anonymous and wealthy. No longer running. Kumi would be at your side, always. Your fortune would make you legitimate, stable.

There were photos of Tokyo, too. You're no older than twenty; she's even younger. There's one with the date in orange numbers: 19-02-95. You and her on a lookout platform of Tokyo's imitation Eiffel Tower. She's wearing sunglasses; the wind's got her hair. You look extremely proud to be with her.

My wife was still alive the day that photo was taken. She might have driven to the beach, the Costa de la Luz, while I was at the Rota base processing codes. I would come home sometimes to find an arrow of silt in the bathtub.

I told you, in the hotel: "There are things you can't forget even though the memory is gone."

And you said: "There are memories you can't recreate even though the evidence is there in front of you."

Those photos scattered on your bed, like pieces dumped out of a puzzle box. Cities, expressions, years. It was harder and harder for you to fit them together in a way that made sense.

One afternoon you went to the airport, carrying just a day bag. My taxi followed yours through the nameless streets and mud-brick chaos of El Alto and I told the driver to wait as you got out at international arrivals.

Twenty minutes later the glass doors opened and you and Kumi stepped onto the sidewalk. She was svelte, fluid. Her body spoke ambition. You pushed her baggage on a trolley. And I didn't realize—until you were entering the hotel you'd rented for her visit, on the Calle Jaén—that she was taller than you.

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The Calle Jaén, the facades white and smooth, black iron balconies. The whole quarter was like something out of Andalucía, half a millennium away. Built from memory, the nostalgia of conquistadors.

Kumi had eaten on the plane, between naps.

"What I want now," she said, "is a bath."

White towels on the floor and wall. The mirror opaque.

She stepped out dripping, like a sculpture in the rain. And you could taste the bath gels as you knelt in front of her.

These were things I didn't see. Things you told me later, in Tokyo.

You were in a restaurant. Kumi had discovered *tucumanas,* little pastries filled with meat, olives, raisins. It's all she would order.

"You know all those commercials I had to do when I was a kid?" she said. "In one of them, I couldn't get the smile right. The director kept shouting to reshoot. I had to eat these wafer crackers. It got so dry I started choking."

She sipped her water.

"I choked so hard I vomited."

"Did they pay you?"

"No," she said. "Well, yes. But my dad kept it, like always. You remember. That was one of the first things you did."

"The first thing—"

"The first time you helped me," she said. "You raided the account he kept all my money in."

"He'd spent a lot of it."

"But there was a lot left. You gave it back to me."

"That was a long time ago."

"That was eight years ago," she said.

It was quiet.

"Are you making a lot of money here?"

"Starting to," you said.

She nodded, and another silence came.

"When are we finally going to live together?"

"Soon." You took her hand. "Soon."

But you knew, and she did too. You were just talking. Indulging in impossibility, because the truth was too bitter.

They were hunting you, and they were close.

In those days you were studying International Banking Law at Tokyo University. You wore a suit and tie to class, but at night you sported piercings and spiked hair. Your father was the director of one of Japan's biggest banks. It had taken him decades of dedication and ruthlessness to build it; growing up, you barely saw him. There were no family vacations and he never paid you allowance. *In life there are no favors,* he said. *You get what you work for.*

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Another dictum: If you failed even one class he'd kick you out of the house. So you studied what he wanted, and kept your grades high.

For pocket money you resorted to small-scale credit-card fraud and identity theft.

Then you met Kumi, and life suddenly got expensive. There were dinners, hotels, taxis. She liked concerts, imported clothes.

"There are certain things I need," she said. And you understood the omitted, *If you can't give them to me, I'll find someone who can.*

You stepped up your operation. You started working with fellow university students, shipping illegal credit-card orders to empty apartments all over the city, manufacturing work and residence permits for the Filipinos and Chinese.

On your twentieth birthday you invited her to your house. You asked your father for only one thing.

"What?" he said, you and Kumi in front of him. She was wearing safety pins as earrings.

"That you give us your blessing to date."

He took one look at her and left the room.

You told Kumi to wait in the kitchen and even she could hear him shout that his son would not be seen dating that Shinjuku gutter-cat. Your response was muffled, but the sound of a hand connecting with flesh was unmistakable.

You came out with your suitcase and laptop. Your cheek was already swelling.

"Come on," you told her. "I don't live here anymore."

You moved into a hotel until you could find an apartment. Kumi stayed those first few nights with you, telling you her dreams and making them yours.

"To travel everywhere," she said, kissing your chest. "To have our own place. To never be judged by anyone."

You had to take your operation another step up. One of the students you worked with had a contact in Aum Shinrikyo.

"Who are they?" you asked.

"A group of scientists and technicians who believe the world is ending. They have," he spread his hands, "unlimited funding."

You were nodding.

"They need people with your skills. And they pay."

You didn't care about their beliefs. You wanted an apartment you'd be proud to take Kumi to. You wanted to never crawl back to your father.

The sarin gas had already been developed. Aum Shinrikyo hired you to create false identities and offshore bank accounts for their key members. It gave them the confidence to conspire, to dream; if things went wrong they had escape routes.

You worked well. You got your apartment.

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Two months later, my wife and I landed in Tokyo. It was our second honeymoon. We'd been married five years. The first night we couldn't sleep. Jet lag and crisp white sheets. She whispered: "I'm ready to conceive. I want to. Here."

The subway attack provoked a massive police investigation. The man who hired you said wait, they can't do anything. But you jumped. You took one of the identities and secret accounts, and vanished. The man who hired you—he was sentenced to death by hanging.

For six months not even Kumi knew where you were. Not until you placed a rerouted call from the other side of the earth. You were in Miami, involved in identity theft and bank fraud, working with a con team who bought, mortgaged, and resold luxury homes. You didn't explain it, not over the phone. You just told her that you missed her, and that you'd booked her a flight. The tickets were in the mail.

And I was back in Spain, where nothing felt mine anymore. I was a code-breaker at the Rota military base. American spies on Spanish soil. Our antenna could sweep communications up to a 3,000-mile radius. I spent my days with numbers and signals, looking for meaning. The desolation came at night. Alone in our bed, remembering her breath like a soft bellows on my skin. The emptiness overwhelmed me. So I moved to the couch, watching the television static fall in patterns until dawn.

Midmorning. You were taking her to see the Witchcraft Market.

You could have blended in, but there was nobody—out of all the vendors, barterers, and witch doctors—that looked like Kumi.

She was wearing a Lufthansa Airlines jacket and black tank-gunner pants. Her hair was spiky, dyed yellow. Her sunglasses cost more than the average Bolivian made in a year.

On the sunbaked asphalt people sold herbs and seeds, animal fragments and folk remedies, enigmatic liquids in bottles. Meanwhile, the witch doctors stitched in and out of the crowds, their heads full of coca and other people's futures.

You were so wrapped up in her I didn't even have to keep my distance.

At a little stand selling llama fetuses Kumi covered her mouth and pointed.

Then. I wasn't sure what I was waiting for, but suddenly it happened.

Two men hustled off through the throng. Kumi let out a shout of amazement, then anger, when she felt for her vanished purse.

They separated and you chased the one with the purse all the way down the Calle Santa Cruz to the Avenida Baptista and pulled him to the ground in the middle of the Flower Market, petals and cut stems everywhere. He rolled over knife-side up and

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you gave no sound, just a look of surprise, as the blade went across your palm. That's when my boot crossed his face and I closed the handcuffs, slippery with your blood, around your wrists.

"Quién coño eres?" you shouted as I steered you, shoving your head down, past the flower sellers.

"Your father is dying," I said. "His last wish is to see you. I'm making sure that happens."

You didn't resist. As we walked, I began to relax.

Suddenly you fell and kicked back with the agility of a tumbler, and before I could breathe again you'd already got the handcuffs around in front of you. I drew my gun and leveled as you dashed past the wicker baskets and flower women, but the colors and screams got in my eyes and I put it back.

Sprinting after you, knocking into things I didn't even see.

We crossed into the cemetery. A maze of mausoleums several stories high, little glass windows covering the niches: apartment blocks for the cremated.

I crashed through devoted family members and a string of professional mourners and when I stopped to apologize the mausoleum walls were still spinning and nobody could tell me which way you'd gone.

I left the cemetery. *"Señor,"* I heard. *"Disculpe, señor."*

It was a small boy, a beggar. He had something to sell.

"Show me," I said.

He held out a pair of handcuffs. They still had your blood on them.

She was where I thought she'd be. Back at your hotel on the Calle Jaén. I called from the lobby.

"Meet me at the cafe three doors down," I said. "It's about your boyfriend."

Her face was a little less beautiful. She'd either been sleeping or crying.

She ordered a Coca-Cola and the waiter looked at me. *"Lo mismo,"* I said.

He brought two scuffed glass bottles.

"Is he okay?" she asked. Her accent was unquestionably Japanese.

"He can be," I said, placing the bloody handcuffs on the table, "if you tell the truth."

She was quiet for a long time.

"He's been away for seven years. Why do they suddenly want him back?"

She put her fingertip to the blood. A tear came.

Kumi told me everything. That your father was extremely ill; the doctors gave him a few weeks. That his bank was one of the most important in Japan. He'd spent his life expanding and defending it and now a group of rival shareholders wanted to take

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it over. The old man's wish, it was rumored, was for his vanished son to replace him. He would forgive everything, like a king passing his throne to the errant prince.

At the end I asked: "How do you know all this?"

"The man who hired you," she said, "he have pointy fingernails?"

"How—?"

"You and me," she said, "we work for same people. Rival shareholders."

Kumi stayed in La Paz for three more days, waiting for some sign of you. Then flew home. It was the last time she or I would see you in the Southern Hemisphere.

"What were you doing there?" I asked. "Other than hiding out."

You turned to me, all the lights of Tokyo behind you.

"Making money."

"You were using the Indians," I said, "to do something with Bolivian banks."

"I was giving them work," you said. "And paying them well."

"To do what?"

"To take out loans."

"Loans?"

You faced the glass again. A helicopter landed on top of a skyscraper.

"Banco Sol was giving out collateral-free micro-credit loans," you said. "It was an initiative of the Bolivian government, to help poor people set up small businesses. The vast majority of the loans were being repaid. Banco Sol got careless."

"And you tricked the Indians. You told them it was free money."

"No," you scoffed. "They knew better. I drew up business plans, gave them false identities, told them how to dress. They took out the loans, and gave me two-thirds."

"What about the identities?"

"They burned them. And disappeared back into El Alto."

You disappeared among mausoleums and reappeared in Lisbon.

That warehouse where you lived and worked. The River Tagus lapped vast and opaque, and at night you watched semi-trucks and buses cross the Vasco de Gama Bridge. All those nights you couldn't sleep, knowing Kumi had sold you, and needing her anyway.

Now, not even she knew where you were.

You lay on a mattress, surrounded by plastic envelopes full of stolen and counterfeit passports, birth certificates, national identity cards, work permits.

On the floor, next to the photos of Kumi, the brick-red cover of your new passport. This time you were Spanish. Your name was

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Ignacio Onoda.

You repeated and repeated it but it didn't ring true. It was a life without her.

The procession of headlights across the Vasco de Gama Bridge. The emptiness gave you vertigo.

You held out as long as you could, and then called.

You sent the tickets, but she never came.

I did.

Lisbon is a labyrinth of red-tile roofs. A labyrinth laid out over seven hills, intercut by uneven stairways and deteriorating castle walls.

You were in the port, they told me that. Finding you was a matter of patience.

I rented a car and drove the Avenida Infante Dom Henrique, exploring all the service roads and side streets. I parked, watched. Corrugated warehouses, dockside cranes. And beyond everything, the container ships riding enormous on the estuary.

It took a week.

You slid open the red iron door of a warehouse and chained it behind you. You were carrying a leather Puma bag. I watched you walk into the white afternoon, direction La Baixa.

Then got out of the car.

Inside.

Dim, spacious. Your mattress on the polished cement floor, the photos of Kumi spilling from their pile. Nearby were all those plastic envelopes full of passports, work permits, national ID cards.

In the corner glowed a black light. On industrial shelves and picnic tables you had card printers, scanners, laptops, laser printers, an embosser, a tipper, and a hologram replicator.

I got the idea, which you confirmed later.

Lisbon was a port city, and an entry point to the European Union. Every day—from the economic freeze of the Ukraine, from the arid misery of Algeria and Morocco, from the murder and famine of black Africa—arrived scores of immigrants looking for new lives.

You were selling them those lives, and making a fortune at it.

I went back to the photographs of you and Kumi. Her hair and wardrobe changed with each city. It was as if she was running from some version of herself, or trying to invent another.

"Both," a voice said.

I turned and you were there, fifteen feet behind me.

"You spend too much time alone," you said. "You've started to think out loud."

I drew my gun.

You dropped the Puma bag.

"Don't move," I said.

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You took a step towards me. "You're a long way from Bolivia."

You took another step.

"Don't move!" My gun aimed, and I was seeing the secret military plane they flew my wife home in.

"Listen. Whatever my father is paying you, I'll double it."

You took another step.

We carried her casket across the runway.

"It's easy," you said.

Her in the Tokyo sheets, whispering she wanted to be a mother.

"Just forget you found me."

You took one more step, and my gun erupted.

You stood, stupefied.

"You missed."

"On purpose," I said, and struck blood from your mouth with the gun butt.

So I took you home.

At Portela Airport your passport raised no questions. I led you to the gate with my hand around your elbow, like a coach escorting a player off the field.

That eighteen-hour flight to Tokyo. You at the window seat, your ankles handcuffed. You were nursing a cracked tooth.

Eighteen hours. We spoke once.

You asked: "What did you do before this?"

"Before what?"

"Before you hunted people."

At that moment I didn't know if the clouds I saw were part of Europe or Asia.

"I was a street cleaner."

You glanced over.

"And before that?"

"Before that," I said, "I had a life I loved."

Home.

"This is what I remembered," you said, "when I was away."

At dusk and at dawn, the skyscrapers gleaming like lenses. Monorails full of sleeping office workers, phone booths wallpapered in sex leaflets. You saw manga comics, Shibuya Crossing. There were suburban homes with eaves and tiled roofs, homeless men in boxes and blue tents. And the night: the punks, salarymen, and hookers all colliding on the neon sidewalks of Shinjuku.

"This is what I remembered, when I lied. When I tried to pretend Tokyo was more than just her."

This Akasaka hotel room.

I lay on the bed, my shoes on. The gun rested on my chest.

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"How'd they know I was in Madrid?" you asked. "How'd they know about La Paz?"

I shrugged.

You said one word: "Kumi."

"Why?"

"She felt trapped in her life. She wanted a new one, but that one cost a lot."

You were at the window, facing your reflection.

"When I was on the run, trying to get rich, it's all I thought about. Building us that life. Acquiring enough money to make it permanent. But I wasn't fast enough. She got sick of waiting."

"But she'd been doing it for years. Why stop?"

"Out of nowhere," you said, "a man offered her more cash than she would make in her working life, just to say where I was."

You shook your head. There was shame, scorn.

"And he told her the one thing I'd kept from her."

Several months earlier. Her last visit to Madrid.

She'd sold you.

No one had moved yet, but you already sensed the trap to be laid. You flew her into Barajas and had her take a taxi to your hotel on the Castellana.

The city mute beyond the glass. The Iberia sign blazed red and gold atop an apartment tower. Roses lay across the bed.

She said: "Why didn't you meet me at the airport?"

And you said: "There wasn't time."

"You always had time before."

"I wanted to finish everything up. To be able to concentrate on us."

You left the lights off, carried the roses to the table. By the end of it you felt her tears on your face, and the silence between you was recognition enough.

The next day you went shopping. Serrano, Claudio Coello, Goya. You bought her everything she wanted and you paid cash. You remembered something she'd said once, when these trysts and long absences were still novel to her. *My friends all envy how international my wardrobe is.*

In prison, you thought, you can't wear any of it.

Twilight. Indigo clouds blown across the sky.

You came out of a six-story department store and were starting to cross the street. The alarm went off. Suddenly a kid knocked into you, hard, so hard you felt his breath, and sprinted down the Calle Narváez. A team of security guards swarmed out of the department store and sprinted after him.

You looked at Kumi and all those shopping bags, and shivered. As you were waiting for a taxi, the guards escorted the kid back into the store. His sweatshirt was black from the asphalt.

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She said: "I wonder what he stole."

And you said: "I wonder who he stole it for."

I said yes, because your voice was sheer yearning. I said yes, because in two days you'd be dead forever.

"But both of you," I said, "will speak only English. You have thirty minutes. And you'll be handcuffed to me."

We took a taxi to a sushi restaurant in Harajuku.

Kumi showed up late. Her hair was blue-black, thrust forward.

She greeted you in Japanese. As you stood, I jerked down on the handcuffs. "Uh, we have to speak English," you said. You kissed her.

She was gorgeous, nervous. She made no sign of recognizing me.

The waiter brought tuna and salmon sashimi. We made small talk, lifting the pink and orange filets with our chopsticks.

"She earns her degree this semester," you said.

Kumi nodded.

"What are you studying?"

"Design," she said.

"I told her she had to finish," you said. "I never did. I regret it."

"Never what?"

"Finished university."

"Yes, but say him why," she interjected bitterly.

You looked at her, then looked down.

"Yeah, well, it's one of the things I hope to do now that I'm back."

We all fell quiet.

Kumi stood up. She was crying. "Excuse me. I go to bathroom."

You tried to get up. I shook my head.

And your voice had that same sheer yearning. And you'd be dead soon anyway.

"Fine," I said, unlocking the handcuffs. "But I'll be waiting outside the bathroom door."

You talked fast, jerky, in Japanese. You kept repeating something.

You came out a few minutes later, alone.

We sat down. I locked your wrist to mine.

"Did you get that resolved?"

You nodded, not looking at me. "She's going to stay in there a bit longer. She's pretty shaken up."

"All right," I said. "Time's up. Ask for the check."

In the taxi you said something to the driver. We went around the block.

"What's going on?" I said.

"Just . . . hold on. I need to see something."

We went around two more times and then Kumi came out of the restaurant. Her mascara was running. She got into a car. It was long and black, an antique. The kind generals used in World War II.

We followed.

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At a red light, in the Ginza shopping district, the door opened. And Kumi, with no more life than a Ginza mannequin, tumbled out.

This Akasaka hotel room. Maybe the last time.

You were at the window, your hair damp. You'd just taken a shower and even over the water I could hear you crying.

"What did she tell you at the restaurant?" I asked.

"What I already suspected."

Below you, the city lights spread uncountable.

"That there's a power struggle inside my father's bank. That she was working for his enemies. And that you are, too."

"Anything else?"

"That she was sorry."

I nodded.

"I've employed a lot of people," you said, "and I can tell when someone's doing a job just for the money. You're not. Why?"

For a long time it was quiet. Then I spoke.

"You never finished university."

"What?"

"You never finished university."

"I left," you said. "I told you that."

"But you didn't say what term."

You turned to face me.

"Spring, 1995," I said. "The same time as the terrorist attack."

You stiffened.

"They carried nerve gas, in double-lined bags, onto subway trains."

I moved close to you.

"My wife died that day."

Your voice came out hollow. "Who?"

I said her name.

You were thinking. You were whispering names.

"No," you said. "She wasn't—"

I moved closer.

"Twelve people," you said, "died. But nobody with that name."

"She was the thirteenth. Her name was never published."

"What, what are you talking about?"

"She was Spanish. She was the wife of a U.S. Marine officer. Me. I was a code-breaker, top secret. That kind of international coverage would have compromised everything. My government suppressed it."

You crammed yourself against the glass. I leaned in over you.

"You killed her. You and that cult."

"I didn't—"

I put the gun to your abdomen. I pushed.

"No," you said. "That's not what you want. That won't bring her back."

I pushed so hard that a knife would have gone through you.

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You gasped, falling burdensome into me.

"To destroy a man," you panted, "destroy the thing he loves. They've already taken Kumi. There's nothing else you can do to me."

You slid down the glass, and we crouched there, exhausted as lovers.

It happened faster than I thought possible.

The room-service waiter knocked. He had acne on his forehead. He placed a bottle on the table, bowed to you, and left.

"It's over," I said. "Your father's men will be here any minute. We're both going home."

"To going home," you said.

Your glass clinked mine and we drank our whiskey.

But you knew I was lying. Your father had no idea you were here. The man with the sharpened fingernails—it was his men who would step out from the elevator with garrotes and calfskin gloves.

"I'm sorry about Kumi," I said.

"Don't be. It's the only thing that could have happened."

You watched a jet, taillights flashing, rise into the night.

"Loyalty—" you waited for your voice to get steady "—is priceless. It's what my father looked for, in his employees. He wanted samurai."

"What?"

"The samurai were so loyal they would commit suicide rather than serve another lord." You paused. "They did it for other reasons, too."

"Like?"

"To save one another. To avoid falling into the hands of the enemy."

I set my glass on the polished table. I thought you were in shock.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I said.

You grunted, watching that jet rise.

And when I came out you weren't there. Just your oil mark on the window.

The hallway was long silent carpet. The ice machine hummed in a recess.

A movement.

I crept. Behind the ice machine a young man was putting your clothes on but he wasn't you.

I rammed him into the machine and a batch of ice fell rumbling inside.

"Who are you?"

He gasped something. Then I noticed the acne on his forehead.

"Read," he said.

He handed me a note with your handwriting.

I read it.

So that's why they killed Kumi, I thought. That day she cried in the restaurant. She repented. She warned you. And you told her—

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before she did anything else, before she even left the restaurant—to call your father. He placed an agent in the hotel.

Then I did what the note said, because both our lives depended on it.

I pushed the young man into the room.

And you, dressed as a waiter, walked into the Tokyo night.

In your clothes he actually resembled you. I didn't think to search him.

"Where is bathroom?" he said.

I pointed.

He closed the door behind him.

A melting cube shifted in my glass. Then I heard the gunshot.

The elevators ring, and this time it's our floor.

I'm at the window, where you were. The skyscrapers reflect other skyscrapers.

Footsteps in the long silent hall. They're coming for you.

My head rests the same place yours did. The shot's replaying in my ears.

A knock. Four men stand distorted in the eyehole.

"Good evening, Major," he says as I open the door. His fingernails are sheathed in calfskin. "I hope you've enjoyed the city."

The man with the garrote closes the door. They all have gloves.

I tilt the bottle. It comes out amber.

"He's in the bathroom," I say, turning my back.

Their shoes echo on the tile.

"My God," calls the one with the sharpened fingernails. "He shot himself in the face."

I swallow, the whiskey sweet on my lips.

"He didn't want to fall into your hands."

"Understood." He gives an order in Japanese. Shoes move on the tile.

I wipe your oil mark from the window. The lights of Tokyo are as numberless as stars.

"You may leave now, Major," he calls from the bathroom. "By noon tomorrow your account will be credited."

I nod.

Down there, amid the lights, you're already in one of your father's limousines. You're going home.

The elevator opens and I step in.

In a month your father will be dead. You will have changed your name a final time. Older employees will think, only to themselves, how like his vanished son the new director looks. And the rival shareholders, their power-play blocked, will be unable to do anything. The errant prince has returned, and become king. ●

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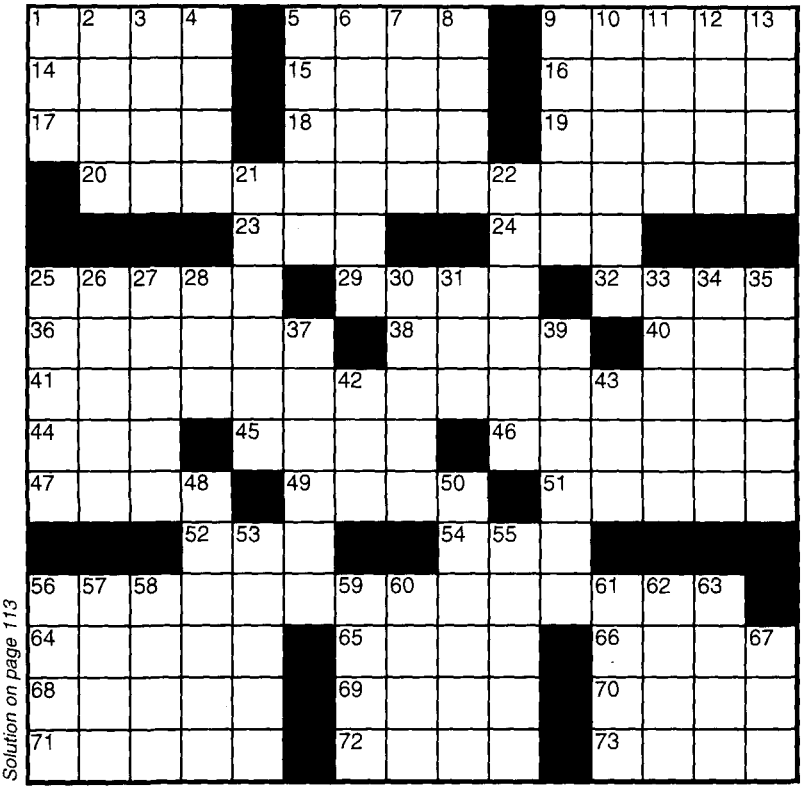
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Departing This Vale

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 113

ACROSS

1. Part of USNA
5. Matured
9. Wanderer
14. Actor Chad in *Apprentice to Murder* (1987)
15. James Lee Burke's detective Robicheaux
16. Cheer
17. Russian sea
18. Chief Inspector Markby in 41 Across
19. More wicked
20. In the act (Peter King)

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23. Gas, pref.
24. Anger
25. "My lord, his throat is cut; _____ did for him." *Macbeth,* III, iv, 15
29. Muslim ruler
32. Suggestive
36. _____ corpus
38. Title for Athena
40. Kanga's child
41. And then . . . (Ann Granger)
44. Actor Beatty in *The Big Easy* (1987)
45. Narrow opening
46. Part of Maigret's weekend
47. West German river
49. Kind of rug
51. Storms
52. Pitcher handle
54. Adjective for "Paree"
56. What was said (Paula Gosling)
64. Falco's daughter
65. Hermes' mother
66. *Was it* _____ *I saw?* Sue Perry
68. Warning signal
69. Lager
70. Dislodge
71. Coty and Descartes
72. Being
73. Tore

DOWN

1. *Murder* _____ *Mode,* Patricia Moyes
2. String
3. *Games to Keep the Dark* _____, Marcia Muller
4. Supermarket section
5. Saw
6. In abundance
7. Hunter, author of *Criminal Conversations*
8. Nick
9. *Old Sinners* _____ *Die,* Dorothy Salisbury Davis
10. Aaron Elkins' "Gideon ____"
11. African country
12. Gymnast's aim
13. Edward Streeter's ____ *Mabel*
21. Water nymphs
22. Employers
25. Macbeth, for one
26. Partner of "hemmed"
27. Residence
28. Three, pref.
30. Photo finish
31. ____ de France
33. Satellite of Uranus
34. _____ Nast, publisher of *Vanity Fair*
35. Berra's namesakes
37. Wage
39. Slow tempo
42. Evergreen
43. Singer Sumac
48. Fix a lamp
50. Texas A&M team
53. Rick Boyer's sleuth "Doc _____"
55. On to
56. Distant
57. Classify
58. Zeal
59. Cordage fiber
60. John Rebus's negatives
61. NFL team
62. Plunge
63. Rescue
67. Infamous Mr. Bundy

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Art by Ron Bucalo

PLEDGE NIGHT

by William Hallstead

For Kat Curtci this was a new experience. Show biz! Well, sort of. She wasn't actually *on* public TV. She was stationed just outside Studio A's huge gaping door—at a table with two other volunteers. Her job: sorting the pledge slips generated by the row of volunteer phone answerers on camera under the studio lights' hot glare.

"Pledge now!" insisted the platinum-maned on-air personality, shimmering in her metallic green formal. "And for a forty-dollar membership pledge, we'll send you an imitation-silk scarf—" which she unfurled into the camera's glass-eyed stare. "For one hundred dollars, you'll get this faux-suede briefcase. And for a one-hundred-fifty-dollar pledge, this canvaslike director's chair! So *call us now!*"

The camera's little red light blinked out. The pledge flogger, commercial TV Channel 2's evening news anchor doing her bit for public TV, turned to jittery little floor manager Len Pyrie. "Jeez! Don't you people give away anything *real?*"

A scream, shrill and chilling, burst out of the darkness down the hallway. Kat felt something she had never felt before. Her arms

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prickled. A spear of ice knifed down her spine.

"Were we off-camera?" Len Pyrie yipped into the little mike attached to his headset. "Were we off-camera?" His concern was that thousands of Channel 43's viewers may have heard that screech of horror. Kat's concern—now she had run halfway down the hall—was more direct. What in *hell* had just happened down there in the murky gloom of a safety light?

Pyrie shouted a plea to the in-studio people to stay put, but behind her, Kat heard a rush of footsteps. Her fellow table-side volunteers. Almost knocking her down, the small door to Studio A's control room flew open. A bushy-haired bear of a man stuck his head out.

"What in hell was that?"

At five-eleven, with legs long enough to outrace anyone in the place, Kat flew past him. She skidded to a stop in front of a little blond woman in a blue slacks suit, frozen in place, hands slapped across her mouth, eyes saucered and fixed on—

My God! Kat's stomach flipped over. She swallowed sour bile. Blood, brain matter—and in the middle of it, that had to be the top of a shattered skull, its long, dark hair soaking in the horrifying splatter.

"I was—I was—I was—" the middle-aged blonde babbled.

Kat grabbed her shoulder and turned her away from the horror on the floor.

"I went to the restroom," the woman managed. "Got lost and came back this way—"

"Go back to the studio," Kat said as firmly as she could. "The rest of you," she called up the hallway, "there's no need to come down here. Everyone back to the studio."

The gaggle of volunteers and staffers stopped. The hairy guy from the control room kept coming. A management grizzly routed out of comfortable electronic hibernation by that scream.

"Sir, please stay where you are."

Without slowing his shambling approach, he growled, "Who the hell are you to be giving out orders?"

"I'm Detective Katherine Curtci, Malabar Island Police, sir. My badge is in my shoulder bag back there under the table.

Murder at a PBS pledge drive? What a great theme for a mystery! And author William Hallstead knows about broadcasting. He wrote a book on the subject in 1984, and he was the director of development and information services for Maryland's public television network for 16 years. He also served for two years as chairman of the PBS Development Advisory Committee. He's been appearing in *EQMM* for more than a decade.

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You are . . . ?"

"Charlie Marks." Now his tone was considerably subdued. "I produce the weekly *Island Happenings* series. Got stuck with the pledge-week shows this time around. Just what is—"

He glanced down. *"Oh my God!"*

Blood. And more. Pooled where Studio B's two-story-high steel door stood tight against its jamb.

"Len!" the rattled producer yelled up the hallway. "Keep everybody back there."

Kat broke her renewed floor-bound stare. "Is there another way into this studio?"

"The control-room access door just down the hall." Marks's voice cracked. "H-here, I'll show you."

They stepped around the horror on the floor. Marks led the way into the studio's adjacent control room, then began to open a second door into the dark studio.

"Hold it, Mr. Marks." Her investigative instinct kicked in. "Can we have some light in there?"

He clicked on several of the studio's big overhead klieg lights. She opened the access door, peered into their garish blaze. The barnlike studio was empty. Except for running shoes, toes down; rumpled jeans; corduroy jacket with arms outflung, shoulders jammed against the big door.

She heard Charlie Marks retch. "That's . . . that's an eight-ton door. Motor-driven on tracks. But it just creeps. How in hell could Ned possibly have stuck his head into—"

"You know who that is?"

"Only Ned Osterman wore a ratty corduroy jacket like that one. One of our camera ops."

From the doorway, Kat studied the hideous tableau. "Where's the switch to actuate the door?"

"That big button just to the right."

The bright red mushroom-shaped pressure switch adjacent to the jamb looked to be about four feet from the floor.

Marks began to step past her into the studio. She grabbed his arm.

"What?"

"There's nothing you can do for him now. And I think we've got a crime scene here."

The bearlike producer gaped at her. "Crime scene!"

"You think your cameraman—or anybody—would commit suicide this way?"

"Hell no, but I think he could have tripped, reached for support, slapped the switch by mistake—"

Beneath the raven swath across her forehead, Kat's jade green eyes skewered him. "Then he waited while that eight-ton, two-

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story-high door rumbled into his head?"

"Knocked himself out when he fell. Was unconscious when the door . . . when the door—"

She grabbed his shoulder. "Sit down, Mr. Marks. Head between your knees."

"I'm sorry. I—"

"I'm pretty damned shaky myself, sir." She gulped the in-pouring icy studio air. "Maybe your theory is possible, but I'd guess not. Where's the nearest phone?"

He nodded into the control room. "Over there on the wall." Then he lurched back to his feet. "I gotta get back to Studio A. All the programs tonight are national feeds, but our breaks are live. God knows how all those people are reacting. Next pledge break isn't due for forty minutes. I'd better take them all into the lobby for coffee." He clumped back through the control-room door into the corridor.

Kat made her call. Then her show of police cool ran out. She sagged against the control-room wall. Come on, girl. You've seen worse than this back in Baltimore County. The woman with the—No, nothing in her decade of police work had been more grisly than this.

A half-hour later, producer Charlie Marks had managed to get his staff and volunteers back in line. "Told them it was a tragic accident," he muttered to Kat as she drew black coffee from the urn set up in the lobby for the pledge-night volunteers.

Now recognized as the authority on the scene, she had expected an onslaught of questions from the crowd in the lobby. But staff and volunteers alike seemed to be avoiding the Studio B horror by avoiding her. One ponytailed, miniskirted staffer did sidle up to her apologetically. "At least that awful scream didn't go out over the air, thank God. That would have really pulled the plug on the pledge break coming up."

No sympathy for the fallen?

Across the lobby's reception island, she eyed the uniformed security man's badge.

"Mr. Karlson? I'm—"

"I know who you are."

"Might I join you back there?"

"Suit yourself."

She slipped behind the desk and took the empty receptionist chair. He looked over at her, left eyebrow cocked. Surely in his sixties, balding, pie-pan face beginning to sag, moderate pot under his brown uniform.

"You're one hell of a pretty cop," he said.

She had long ago outgrown bristly responses to sexist overtures.

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Instead, she smiled radiantly. "Why, thank you, sir. That's the nicest thing that's been said to me this whole upsetting evening."

His scrawny eyebrows went up, his mocking grin erased. "Jesus, Officer, how can you be so together after seeing what's back there in the hall?"

"You saw it?"

"I just now snuck a look—from a distance. I'm not paid for stuff like that." He swallowed. "Okay. What can I do you for?"

"How secure was this building tonight?"

"It's pretty damned secure every night. See them four monitors? One for a camera on each side of the building. Nobody goes in or out any side or back door without I spot him. And them doors're locked after six P.M. Only access at night is through the front door there."

"And tonight you saw . . . ?"

"Zilch. Only people in or out was through the front."

"Can you give me a list of staffers who came in or left after working hours?"

"Sure. They all hafta sign in and out. I'll take the names off the logbook there."

"Fine. I'll check back before I leave."

As the station's entrance door swung open, lobby chatter fell silent. Out of the tepid Southwest Florida night trooped stumpy, graying county medical examiner Cal Hewlett, ever jaunty in his flapping tan chinos and signature Orioles baseball cap. Behind him clustered his pair of techies, a duo of Malabar Island uniformed cops, and—this had to be the police dispatcher's inspiration—an EMT team, though the victim was beyond hope.

"You rang?" the M.E. asked as Kat stepped out of the lobby confusion.

"Sorry to drag you out at this hour, Cal."

"Death has no timetable," he said cheerily. "Lead on."

She told one of the two cops to stand by, let no one leave, and make a list of the volunteers. The other uniform she took along to secure the scene of the crime—or accident, if Marks's guess happened to pan out.

Hewlett, his techies, the cop, and the EMT team trooped behind her to the Studio B control-room door.

"Oy!" said one of the forensic team, spotting the unpretty condition of the hall floor.

Kat opened the control-room door.

"Rest of you stay here for the moment," Hewlett told the others, "though I expect the scene has already been trampled."

"Nope," Kat said. "In fact, it may be the only crime scene of the year with no contamination whatsoever. I didn't even go in there myself."

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She opened the second door, the one into the studio. "I just looked in from here."

"And decided it's a crime scene?"

"It would have to be an incredible accident sequence, Cal."

She stepped aside, and he stuck his head into the studio. "Holy cow!"

With staff and volunteers now back in Studio A for the final pledge break, the lobby was nearly deserted.

"You have that staff list?" Kat asked the security guard.

Karlson handed her a scrap of lined paper he'd apparently torn from the little notebook in his breast pocket. "Top group are Charlie Marks's studio crew. My opinion, they'd all be pretty well occupied, even between pledge breaks."

"You don't think it was an accident."

His watery blues peered at her. "Do you?"

"I'm asking you, Mr. Karlson."

"I know how them doors work. The guy'd hafta hit that mushroom switch on his way down, bang himself unconscious on the floor, lay there awhile for that door to rumble into him. I was a Jersey City cop for twenty-two years. Don't smell right to me."

"Duly noted." Kat tapped the list. "Who are these other three?"

"First one, Bart Richards, is the station manager. He hung around till nine forty-five, then he left same time as the next one."

"Molly Flanker."

"Yeah. She's the producer of that series, *Florida* . . . uh . . ." He snapped his fingers.

"*Florida Career Women.*" Kat had been asked to appear on the program, but declined. Personal publicity was a dedicated detective's bane.

"That's her. She left the same time the boss did."

"And this third name?"

"Frank Watson? He runs the tape library. Left a couple minutes after the other two."

"And there was nobody else in the building after-hours except the Studio A crew?"

"I made my rounds at nine, and them was the only three still here—outside of the people in Studio A."

"You checked the rear hallway?"

"Walked right behind you, Detective, outside Studio A. The nine-o'clock pledge break was just starting, and everybody was watching the action."

If she'd missed seeing him walk by, what else might she have missed?

"So," he said for her, "the big door done in Osterman sometime after that."

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"You didn't see him on that nine-o'clock tour?"

"No, come to think of it."

"How detailed a check do you make?"

"Try all outside doors, look in all the offices."

"How about the front door while you're out of the lobby?"

"I lock it—with my key. Nobody in or out while I'm not there."

Only a few loopholes, she judged. But this was a TV station, not a high-security installation.

"You ever catch any station gossip out here?" she asked Karlson. "Any sense of problems? Anything at all concerning Osterman?"

"Except for pledge nights, there's nobody here but me. You want to ask about late-night radio programs, I'm your man." He tapped the little pocket radio on the desk. "You want station gossip, ask Eddie Mair. Retired cop like me. He's got the day shift. Spends most of it gassing with the receptionist."

Cal and company bustled into the lobby en masse. "Oh, you still here, Kat?"

"I'm awaiting the word, Cal."

"Go home. Prelim finding: an accident. A weird one, but an accident. Vic's right palm print's on the door switch."

"That's it? An accident? You're sure?"

"Only thing I'm sure of is time of death between nine-thirty and ten P.M." He nodded down the hall. "We're hustling the poor bastard out while they're all in the studio." On the M.E.'s stretcher, the body bag trundled past.

"Go home," Cal told her. "I'll call you."

Rolling past black palms in the post-midnight darkness, Kat realized she had a vise grip on her Ford Explorer's steering wheel. An accident. She could see every detail of the horrible sight in Studio B. A mental photograph, indelible these two hours later. Serves you right, her corporate bookkeeper father would say in his blunt, old-world way. He'd never quite reconciled his vision of her future as a dutiful wife and mother with the reality of her fascination with law enforcement.

"You are a bright young woman," he'd said in his slight but persistent Romanian accent the day she graduated from Towson University. "You will make a wonderful wife for some fortunate—"

"I'm going into the Air Force, Dad."

He looked as if she'd slapped him. "Did I hear my daughter right? The *military?*"

"Air police. A leg up, I hope, on a career."

"You are not spoofing me? A daughter of mine a *policeman* . . . woman . . . person? Your mother will—"

"She already knows."

"She approves?"

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Kat grinned at him. "She admires . . . ambition."

To his credit, Anton Curtci burlesqued a hopeless shrug. "So this is what happens when your child is twice as smart as yourself. Approve or not approve, I will not say. But I do say, do your best." Abruptly, he embraced her. And she had done her best, departing the U.S. Air Force four years later as a captain, joining the Baltimore County Police Department to make detective in six. Then disaster. The fellow detective she loved was gunned down by a panicked teenager. She had taken the opening in the Malabar Island Police Department to fill the aching emptiness with *work*—far from the scene of traumatic loss.

And here she was trying to build a case with highly respected med examiner Cal Hewlett calling it a damned accident. Talk about dedication trampling common sense. As she pulled into the sand-and-shell drive of her little cottage on the east side of the island, the bay shore, a feeling of contrition began to eat at her investigative confidence. She went to bed with it, woke up with it. Then came Cal's phone call.

At eight forty-five A.M. At home.

"Suspected you'd be going in a tad late after last night's festivities. Autopsy hasn't turned up anything suspicious—limited, of course, by the condition of the cadaver."

"No doubt."

"Our vacuuming procedure didn't find much of note. Straight pin and a hairpin. The vic's jacket, though . . ."

"What about the jacket?"

"Flour among the corduroy ribbing."

"Flowers?"

"F-L-O-U-R. As in baking."

"I'm not following this, Cal. You want to get down to details?"

He could hardly wait.

"You wanta run that by me again?" Sgt. Ellis "Moby" Duckworth said from the passenger seat of their drab Plymouth. Eighteen minutes after Cal's phone call, she had collected her pudgy partner and the department's unmarked car at Malabar Island Police HQ in the City Hall building.

"One more time, Moby. Studio B was used for a cooking show yesterday afternoon. Breaded grouper or something like that. Used flour. The set was in the rear third of the studio, not near the door. Cal believes—"

"Osterman was knocked down in that area and dragged through some flour sprinklings to the door. So it's murder."

She knew he'd gotten it the first time, but he was instinctively using an old cop's device. See if you get the same details the second time around.

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She was more amused than irritated. "I'm not a witness, Moby."

"Almost were."

She swung the car off the Island's main road into Liana Lane. His knuckles were white on the dash. Never quite trusted her driving, but always wanted her to drive. She glanced at him. Creeping up on fifty. Graying, two chins already. Outranked her as a sergeant, but he always seemed to give her the helm. If she was a greyhound, he was a bulldog, plodding but reliable.

Liana Lane terminated in the station's parking area. She found a parking slot beside a gleaming Mercedes SL500.

"Plan of action?" Moby asked.

"I'll work down the list of staffers in the building last night. Those not in the studio. Your job is schmoozing."

"Schmoozing?"

"Yep, with day-shift security man Eddie Mair. Word is he spends his time shooting the breeze with the receptionist."

"Gotcha."

The entrance to Channel 43's cream-painted cinder-block two-story building was flanked by a pair of graceful areca palms amid well-tended tropical plantings. The automatic doors slid open.

"Detective Sergeant Duckworth and Detective Curtci," she told the dowdy, gray-haired receptionist. "I have an appointment with the station manager."

"Mr. Richards. That door to your right."

"Hey, Officer Mair," she heard Moby rumble as she walked toward the indicated door. "How you doing?"

She stepped into another reception area with a small woman behind a small desk with a large sign: "Linda Noble, Administrative Assistant." Frizz-haired Ms. Noble eyed Kat through heavy lenses.

"Go right in, Detective." A note of disdain—or was it envy in that surprisingly low-pitched voice?

Through another pine-veneered door, and there, with a splendid view of jungly green through two corner picture windows, sat Bartram Richards. In an electric-blue sports coat and crimson tie—possibly the only tie being worn on the entire island. A waft of spicy shaving lotion reached across the spacious office.

"Ah, Detective Courtesy!" He rose, thrust his hand across his walnut desk.

"Curtci, Mr. Richards."

His handshake was hearty but damp.

"Deplorable incident last night." He indicated a chair near the desk and sank back into his leather upholstered swivel. "An incredible freak accident." He paused. "Why are you here?"

"Routine investigation of an unusual death." Routine, my eye. "Tell me about Ned Osterman."

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"What about Ned Osterman?"

"Was he liked by the staff?"

"Wait a minute. Where are we going with this?"

"I'm just trying to get a handle on what happened, sir."

"Please. Call me Bart." That, surprisingly, was accompanied with a wink. "Doesn't the name Osterman mean something to you?"

"Not till last night . . . Bart."

"Well, hon, his father—Martin Osterman—was the major donor who made this station possible. Loved by public-TV supporters, not so loved by the local palm huggers."

"Oh, right. I'd forgotten about the struggle to get this place built."

"First I had to convince the city council a public-TV station is an educational institution. Only educational institutions can be built in this lowland wetlands area on the island. Then came the fund drive with Osterman Senior putting it over the top."

"For a small price," she said.

"You guessed it. We hired his son."

"How did that sit with the rest of the staff?"

"Oh, some bitching. Nothing serious."

"Last night was pretty serious, Bart."

He stared at her. "But you can't be. You think somebody actually . . . No, no. It was an accident."

"How was he as a camera operator?"

Richards shrugged. "Adequate."

Kat turned as the door opened behind her. Administrative Assistant Noble.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Richards, but Molly insists on seeing you right away."

"No problem, Linda. Tell her to come on in."

So much for police priority. In strode a statuesque bottle-blonde, nearly as tall as Kat, plum slacks suit militarily crisp. She thrust a sheet of paper at him.

"I absolutely must have you sign off on this request for a new host, Bart. Sally Rhymer just *quit*. Said she can't work here ever again after what happened last night."

Richards looked stunned. "Detective Curtci," he said quickly, "this is Molly Flanker, our most talented producer." Had he stressed "Detective" just a bit? "Hell, Molly," he blurted out, "I thought we downplayed it to the media, kept the TV news vultures out, ran the phone calls through me. What's with Sally?"

"She phoned some of the *Career Women* staff and got the grisly details. Now I'm desperate."

"No problem, Molly." He signed the form, handed it back, then took her free hand in both of his. "Life goes on. He'll be missed."

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The look she gave him was . . . enigmatic. His prolonged handclasp wasn't. Something more than paperwork was going on between those two.

Kat waited for the door to close behind Molly. "Before you left last night, did you notice anything out of the ordinary? Anything at all?"

"Nothing."

"You customarily stay that late?"

"When the paperwork piles up, certainly."

She fished in her handbag for a card, handed it to him. "Thanks for your time, Mr. Richards. Anything you think might be of help, please give me a call."

His face was a blank. "Of help to do what?"

"Determine specifically what happened last night."

"We know what happened."

Perhaps you do, she was tempted to throw back at him; *I don't.* But she stood, smiled. "Thank you. I'll be in touch." *You can bet on that,* Bart.

She found Molly Flanker in her cramped little office three doors down the hall from the station manager's high-profile spread. The door was open.

"Ms. Flanker?"

"Yes?" The willowy producer turned from the window behind her overflowing desk. "Oh, it's the detective. Aren't you the one who refused to appear on my program last year?"

"Refused is a hard word. Let's say I declined your thoughtful invitation. No reflection on the program, but I feel a detective should have a low profile."

"Not today, dear. Word is out all over the building. You think one of us done in Wonder Boy?"

"Osterman?" Interesting reaction.

"The little shit—pardon me, dear. Neddy was in here only because of Daddy's part in the funding." Molly bit her bottom lip. "Sorry. I'm a tad unglued today."

"I suspect everyone on staff is."

"About last night, sure. But I'm really upset by Sally's quitting." Abruptly, she swept a pile of paper aside and plunked her trim butt down on the desktop. "Look, it's shocking about Osterman. Nobody deserves a horrible death like that. But I've got concerns of my own. A new host can be a godsend or a nightmare."

"Before you left last night, did you see or hear anything out of the ordinary?"

"All that damned pledge-begging airtime is out of the ordinary. Outside of that, I'm afraid I'm not much help, whatever you think you're going to accomplish here."

"I assume you and Bart Richards get along well together?"

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Molly's hazel eyes narrowed. "What kind of a question is that?"

"It's an observation."

"In the context of what?"

Kat smiled. "In the context of fishing, I guess."

"Take your rod and tackle elsewhere, Detective. I've got a program series to stick back together."

Kat found Moby in the rear hall observing the scene of what she was convinced had been a murder.

"I got Eddie Mair all talked out," he told her. "Two earsful, that guy. Ex Milwaukee cop, and with me an old Chicago flatfoot, we hit it off like Stanley and Levinstone."

"Livingston."

"Yeah, him. One key thing Eddie told me, there's a coin-op canteen down this way."

They found it at the west end of the hallway. "A Coke and crackers lunch," she muttered.

"Won't be my first. At least there's a place to sit down."

They settled into plastic chairs at a plastic table. No one else in here this late morning.

"Couple items." Moby crammed in a peanut-butter-and-cracker sandwich and talked around it. "First, everybody knows there's a thing going on with the manager and a woman producer named Flanker."

"Suspicions confirmed."

He squinted at her. "You ahead of me on this?"

"I'm with you."

"You know both of them are married?"

"Didn't know that."

"Okay, try this next one. The Flanker woman is a tough operator. Wants everything on her programs to be perfect, but she kept asking for the vic to be assigned as her chief camera op."

"She *asked* for Osterman?"

"Yeah, but Eddie tells me the guy wasn't such great shakes behind the lens. A sloppy, don't-give-a-damn type."

"He didn't have to be good, I guess. His father put a heap into this place, and Neddy's job was his payoff."

"Here's something else, Kat. That Mercedes we pulled in next to? That's Osterman's car. Looks like Dad paid for that, too. Salaries here are more in the Chevy-Ford league."

Kat took a swig from her soda can. "I've got one more staffer to interview. Why don't you see if Charlie Marks is in yet? He was the producer in charge last night. Push him on whether any of his crew was missing from Studio A between about nine-fifteen and ten-fifteen. While you're doing that, I'll be questioning one Frank Watson."

Station librarian Watson's office equaled the station manager's

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in size, but it was windowless. Watson, a lank-haired, slender man in his thirties, peered up from his cluttered desk near the door. He snatched off his half-lensed, gold-framed reading glasses as if he was embarrassed at being caught with them on.

"Can I help you?"

"Detective Curtci, Mr. Watson. Malabar Police. I'm interviewing staff members who were here last night—"

"When Ned Osterman blundered himself to death."

"—at the time of the incident." Kat's eyes had swung past Watson. In the rear of the room, a mousy little woman in a gray smock was replacing a stack of VCR cassettes in slots on the already laden shelves.

"That's Marta Stokes, my assistant. Putting the morning's crop of returns back in inventory."

"I assume the station loans tapes of its programs to interested viewers?"

"Not only tapes of our locally produced programs. I've also got an inventory of most PBS series. This office pays its way, plus bringing in five figures a year for the overall budget. But that's not why you're here." He nodded toward a nearby chair. "Have a seat, Detective."

She perched on the edge of the hard wooden chair. "How well did you know Osterman?"

He shrugged. "Just another staffer. I'm kind of isolated back here. Staff librarian isn't exactly a grabby aspect of show business. I don't think our esteemed manager has been back here more than twice in the past year." He began diddling with a large plastic paperweight.

"You were working late last night. Did you see or hear anything unusual?"

"Not a thing. And it's not unusual for me to be here late. The paperwork for this little op never ends."

His slim fingers tapped the paperweight, a transparent six-inch square nearly two inches thick with a blue plaque embedded in its center.

"What is that thing?" Kat asked.

"A PBS award for excellence in non-broadcast distribution. First one they've ever given out." He sat back. "I'm no help on the Osterman thing, I'm afraid. Maybe I can make it up to you." He waved his arm at the laden shelves. "How about a tape? Anything you want. Bring it back in a couple of days. No charge."

She smiled. "You trying to bribe an officer?"

"With a three-dollar rental tape? Call it an introductory offer."

"I don't think I— Wait a minute. Might you have the *Nation's Oddest Cases* series?"

"Produced in Boston. Got all thirteen episodes."

"I missed the one about the 'alligator murder' right here in Quantrill County."

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"I've got it. Marta!" he yelled over his shoulder. The woman jumped. "Get Detective Curtci number seven in the *Oddest Cases* series."

"I really shouldn't," Kat protested halfheartedly. But she'd been called out on a case the night of that broadcast, had forgotten to record it, and had kicked herself since.

Marta handed her the tape in a plastic bag. Still wordless, but the pale eyes of the gray little woman held Kat's for long seconds. Then she scuttled away to her filing work.

As she guided their unmarked car out of the station's parking area, Moby said, "You got a tape. I got a theory."

"Any straw is worth grasping at this point."

"Well, I got to thinking about that Mercedes. Called old man Osterman—"

"You called Martin Osterman? Moby, he's just lost a son."

Eyes on the road, he grumped, "Sometimes I wonder if you're too tender-hearted for this job, Kat. I—"

"Check my closed-case files, damn it!"

"Yeah, okay. Anyway, I only asked him one question. Did he buy that car for his boy?"

"And?"

"Nope. Told me Ned had bought it out of his earnings."

"So you checked his salary."

"Yep. With the station's business manager. Twenty-four thou a year."

"Well, with time payments . . ."

"But with taxes, apartment rent—he doesn't live at home—meals and what all, it don't seem to me that salary would stretch over that particular car plus his five-figure bank balance."

She shot him a quick glance. "How did—"

"I got a friend at Island Bank. You catch what I'm leading up to?"

"Manager Richards said Osterman's work was only adequate. Producer Flanker called him a 'little shit.'"

"She said that?"

"Quote, unquote. But she kept asking for him to work on her show."

"Throw in the rumor I picked up that Richards and Flanker are playing bed games and you got—"

"Blackmail."

"That's my theory, Kat. Neddy Osterman gets in there thanks to his old man's checkbook. Makes him pretty much untouchable, no matter how so-so a camera op he turns out to be. Hears about the Richards-Flanker diddling and makes a pitch. Few thou now and then, enough to buy a zippy car and feed a bank stash."

She swung out of Liana Lane onto the island's main road. "You

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think he was hitting on both of them?"

"Flanker, for sure. But she'd tell Richards. So there they were, both married, both sorta public figures. And the son of the station's main supporter is a really big threat."

"So they team up and Ned loses his head?"

"Possible, ain't it?"

"Anything's possible, I guess, when a blackmailer has you by the wallet. But even if you're right, Moby, it's all theory. Where's some evidence?"

"You get anything outta Watson? Marks told me he's a mensch, or something like that."

"A mensch?"

"Yeah. I didn't know what he was talking about."

"A mensch, Moby, is an admirable person. It's Yiddish."

"Huh. Marks said he's real bright. Belongs to some brainy society."

"Oh, *Mensa.* You have to pass a tough IQ test to belong." Watson was Mensa caliber? What was he doing in that dreary, non-demanding job?

Damn, what an oddball case. Kat slid chin-deep into the tub's hot suds and mulled while she marinated. The station's manager and his favorite producer as murderers? Moby had bought that, but it was hard to sell her until all the facts were in hand. At this point, she wasn't convinced they were.

At eight P.M., languorously steeped and clad in her only fashion fetish—cerulean blue silk pajamas—she took the tape from its plastic bag.

What in the world!

CALCULUS II, Lesson 6, read the label. Talk about a mix-up. No wonder Watson had seemed so disdainful of his cowed assistant. How much of her time was spent correcting blunders like this one?

Yet there had been Marta's oddly imploring look . . .

Kat switched on her TV and VCR and slipped in the cassette.

Nothing. She ejected the cassette. Tried again.

Nada.

Extracted the cassette and examined it. Full reel and properly empty take-up reel. She opened the flap along the back edge. No tape. No tape? She checked the full reel again—closely this time. Something didn't look right.

From a kitchen drawer, she selected a slender Phillips screwdriver, removed the five little cross-slotted machine screws holding the cassette halves together.

"I'll be *damned,*" she said aloud. The full reel wasn't full at all. A high-resolution photo of a full coil of tape had been glued to the top of the reel. Casual glance, a full reel. Actuality, a fair-sized and

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well-concealed open area surrounding the reel's hub. How could mousy Marta have made such a mistake?

But it hadn't been a mistake, had it? Not when Kat considered that long, pleading look.

What was the purpose of this elaborately faked cassette with its hidden compartment? Then it hit her. Good God!

She went to bed early, went to sleep late. Had she slept at all? Hardly conscious of what she yanked out of her closet, she dressed, gulped a nuked cup of bitter instant, then rushed the Explorer across the causeway and into the medical examiner's parking lot just as Cal was opening up the place.

"What brings you to the mainland so early, Kat? I'm barely—"

She thrust the cassette at him. "I need this checked, Cal. Right now." She told him why.

Fifteen minutes later, he straightened up from his lab table and grinned at her. "You're a genius, Detective. Definite traces."

"Now I want to—"

"There's more?"

"Let me have a look at that pin your guys vacuumed off the studio floor."

Cal rummaged through a filing cabinet, extracted a glassine envelope containing only a small black hairpin and a straight pin with a glass bead head.

She glanced at them and nodded. "That does it. Thanks." And she was out the door dialing Moby on her cell phone as she rushed for her SUV.

When she drove into the Channel 43 parking lot, he was already there, standing with a uniformed cop next to the Malabar patrol unit Kat had requested.

She nodded at big-shouldered Officer Kevin Pyne: Two years out of the army but he still had his mahogany hair white-sidewalled.

Moby's bushy eyebrows lifted. "You got something." Not a question, a statement.

"When we get in there," she said to Pyne, "have security keep an eye on all exits. Then catch up with us in the rear hall."

Specifically, in the tape library—where Marta Stokes hunched in a rear corner, but Frank Watson looked up from his paperwork imperturbable.

Until Kat announced, "Mr. Watson, you are under arrest for cocaine trafficking—and for the murder of Ned Osterman. You have the right to remain silent—"

Abruptly Marta burst into sobs. As Moby and Kat turned toward her, Watson vaulted his desk, rammed Moby aside with a fast hip shot, shoved Kat against the doorjamb, and raced up the hall—straight into Officer Pyne's gorilla grasp.

"I'd say that confirms it." Kat straightened her maroon skirt and

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discovered that in her rush to the M.E. she had grabbed a bright green blouse. Merry Christmas in March?

"What a setup." Moby, as ever, kept his eyes glued to the road as they followed Pyne's unit and prisoner to police HQ for booking. "A mail-order coke business at Channel 43's expense. Packed the stuff after hours in dummy cassettes."

"Wrapped in plastic tubes around the fake tape reels."

"Out goes the product, back comes money in the returned cassettes, payment for the next shipment, according to what's-her-name."

"Marta, Moby. Watson had her traumatized, scared to say anything once she discovered what he was up to. She took a chance that cassette she slipped me would tip me off without involving her."

Moby's feet rammed the floor as she braked behind a Lincoln abruptly swinging off the main drag without a turn signal.

"I follow the drug setup," he said after a reorienting pause, "but you wanna clue me in on how you hung Watson with Osterman's murder?"

"The Mensa connection, Mobe. Charlie Marks told you Watson was a member. I remembered from my college days Mensa people wear a little straight pin with a red head. That's what Cal Hewlett's tech vacuumed up in Studio B."

"Where Watson had connived to meet Osterman."

"Or the other way around."

"Whatever, Watson bonked the guy—"

"With the paperweight, Moby. He was taunting me with it when I first interviewed him."

"Bonks him, drags him to the door, slaps Osterman's palm on the switch, then lets the door roll into his head."

"He didn't realize he'd lost his Mensa pin, but I'm sure he washed the paperweight. Unfortunately for him, I hope, its slick surface is scratched up from desk use. If Luminol finds even a minute trace of Osterman's blood, that should prove premeditation. Motive? We've still got some airtight corroboration work to do there, but you can bet it was to put an end to Osterman's blackmail. Young Neddy had a gold mine here, but discovering Watson's drug business and hitting him for silence was a fatal mistake."

"Cripes, Kat, you've not only solved a murder. You've broken up a drug racket."

"A team effort, Sergeant. You came up with the blackmail angle and Watson's membership in Mensa."

"You trying to make me feel good?"

"Is it working?"

He swung his eyes from the road and gave her a big grin. "Yeah," he said, "it is." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

GERMAN SUMMER

by Frauke Schuster

German author Frauke Schuster was raised in Egypt. Her experience growing up in a foreign country explains, in part, why she likes to write (as she does here) about "people who have to deal with cultures that aren't originally their own." Ms. Schuster has written short stories for some years, and in 2002 her first crime novel, *Atemlos,* was published by KBV in Germany. Another followed in 2003.

When Moustafa woke, he heard his wife crying. At once he knew: It had happened again. His stomach tight with that strange mixture of anger and fear, he scrambled out of bed and grabbed for his pants and worn-out T-shirt.

Downstairs, in the poky little shop where he tried to eke out a living selling fruit and vegetables, his wife sat on the sole chair, right hand frantically wiping streaming eyes, plump body rocking back and forth. Helplessly Moustafa looked at the big hole in the windowpane, at the grey, round stone on the floor.

"We should have stayed at home," his wife wailed. He said nothing.

Only minutes later Moustafa spotted five-year-old Aysha, crouching under the wooden table laden with an enormous heap of big red apples. The little girl was sobbing, too, though she didn't really know why.

But Moustafa knew. He knew who the man was who'd done it all. That bald guy in his military-looking outfit. The one who had beat Moustafa up two months ago, shortly after his twenty-seventh birthday. At home, Moustafa had tried to explain away his bruises and his missing tooth by muttering something about a fall. His wife had pretended to believe him, hadn't dared to question him. In Turkey once, the police had beaten up her brother. She had no experience with authorities here in Germany and she didn't want any. . . .

Feet dragging like an old man, Moustafa went out on the sidewalk to scrub off the words that had been sprayed on the windowpane: *Bugger off, Turk!* Big, bold letters in garish red, burning the glass like undying fire and burning even fiercer in Moustafa's soul.

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When he returned inside, his wife still sat on the chair, unable to rise. Talking gently, Moustafa coaxed small Aysha upstairs, poured milk over a bowl of cereal, and gave it to her. When the little girl had finished and settled down to play with her fair-haired doll, the man went down again to do his work in the shop.

Stacking boxes with peas, eggplants, potatoes on the stands outside, he suddenly got the eerie feeling of being watched. Suspiciously he straightened up, looked around. No one behind him, but— His stomach turned to an icy lump when he saw him, on the opposite side of the street. That bald guy, about his own age, in his usual military boots, camouflage shirt, but no camouflage to cover up his menacing stare. He was smoking a cigarette, watching the shop with malevolent, piercing eyes.

Moustafa wanted to run, to hide in the house, like a frightened kid. But he was too old to play the kid any longer—and too frightened to move. Besides—the smell of the tobacco smoke drifting lazily through the summer morning made him dizzy. In Turkey, Moustafa had always smoked, but after three months in this small town in Southern Germany he had abandoned the habit. Cigarettes cost dearly here, and he needed to save up. For his wife, for young Aysha, for the self-esteem a man couldn't live without. So Moustafa remained fixed to the spot, fearful and yet with a dim longing, even when the guy slowly crossed the street and came over to the fruit shop, cigarette dangling in his hand.

Only when the bald guy's lips parted to speak, Moustafa came to life again, fled into the shop, saw that his wife wasn't there. Probably she had gone upstairs for her own breakfast or to check on frightened little Aysha.

A dark shadow fell through the door, and there the bald guy stood, dusty boots planted firmly on the threshold, eyes narrowed to slits while he looked at Moustafa, took in the shabby room, the raw wooden shelves and tables Moustafa had laboriously built with his own hands.

"Lots of wood," he said in a hoarse voice Moustafa would never forget. "Should be afraid of fires, shouldn't you?" The gaze of his pale blue eyes wandered lazily to the back of the room, came to rest on the stairs. "You live up there? Might be dangerous." Slowly, slowly he raised his hand, let his cigarette stub drop onto the floor. "Would be terrible if something got on fire in here . . ."

The moment the guy turned to leave, Moustafa stomped his foot on the remnants of the cigarette, swallowing hard, partly in anger, partly in his craving for nicotine.

He didn't turn to the police, in spite of the broken window, in spite of the threats, being nearly as distrustful of police officers as his wife. Instead he worked mechanically, in a daze, shouting angrily at his

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young daughter when she came downstairs to play in the shop as she often did on normal days. He didn't want her there today, didn't want the bald guy to see the girl if he should come back. His wife looked at him with an odd expression on her round face when he shouted at the kid to get upstairs and stay there for the rest of the day, but she didn't rebuke him. Only Aysha cried fretfully, because she loved the shop, and the customers loved her. Some of the old women, buying daily what little fruit and vegetables they needed, used to give her candy regularly, delighting in the small black-haired girl with her delicate features, her huge, shy eyes.

All through the endless morning Moustafa stayed tense and alert, attending to the patrons as usual, twisting his reluctant face into a grimace of a smile, though deep inside his soul wept with fear and frustration. Three times his window had been shattered, three times those ugly words had been written on the glass, for everyone to read . . .

"Where's Aysha today?"

She was one of the most regular customers, this tiny old woman, hands shaking from Parkinson's disease when she fumbled for the money to pay for the two bananas and three of the cheapest apples he offered. "Would you give her this?" A small bar of chocolate in trembling spindly fingers, the skin shriveled with age. Skin and fingers like those of his mother, when Moustafa had seen her for the last time before he left for Germany and the fortune that would provide for them all. When Moustafa took the gift from the old woman's hand, hot tears welled up in his eyes. Embarrassedly he bent his head, pretending to have a problem with the cashbox.

Noon came hot and still on that August day. Moustafa closed the shop for two hours, ate the stew of potatoes, mutton, and beans his wife had prepared. Little Aysha was still angry with him, but her looks softened considerably when he showed her the chocolate. For the first time on that dreadful day Moustafa dared to relax.

When he opened the door of the shop again, the bald guy was sitting at the curb on the opposite side of the street, smoking again. He didn't seem to have a regular job, often turned up unexpectedly, sometimes hung around for hours watching Moustafa and his shop with an evil eye. Moustafa's hands shook like that of the woman with Parkinson's, and nowadays it wasn't only the want of nicotine that made him tremble while he arranged boxes with raspberries and peaches on the table outside. Though he was working in the shade, and though he normally would bask in the heat of a summer's day, he felt a surge of sweat soaking his shirt.

He had known the bald guy would return once more. He knew the guy satisfied his perverted mind seeing Moustafa's nervous movements, his anxious looks. Determined to lessen the triumph

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of the other as best as he could, he went inside and busied himself with dusting, with no eye for the dust.

Then the guy stood in the door again. He never went into the shop, never even pretended to be interested in buying anything. He stood there, his tall frame nearly too big for the door, and while he stood in silence, staring, Moustafa suddenly heard fairy-light steps on the stairs. His heart started to race, the beatings hammering in his ears.

"Aysha! Upstairs!" He bellowed the words, but the little girl didn't obey, came dancing into the room, laughing her childish, silvery laugh, black hair flying around her tiny face.

"Go upstairs!"

She paused in her dance, looked up at him with dark eyes whose innocence wrung his heart.

"Please, *sevgili!* Darling! Go to your mother!" His words now were barely audible, more a wish than a whisper. The little girl stuck her thumb in her mouth, slowly retreated towards the stairs, finally sensing something was frighteningly, horribly wrong.

When Aysha had gone, the bald guy spoke in his hoarse, harsh tones. "Cute girlie, your kid! What a pity if she got hurt." Again he dropped his cigarette end where he stood, and Moustafa didn't dare to rush forward to pick it up. "Things burn that quickly these days, what with the heat and all . . ." His voice trailed off.

Moustafa's head swam; he couldn't see the guy clearly. The guy who threatened his daughter, his precious little Aysha, named after his mother and even dearer than her. He wanted to scream, to shout, to hit the guy's face, to run a knife into the broad chest, into that evil heart that talked of murdering a child! But once more, he couldn't even move, much less think clearly, frozen to the floor with fear, confusion, hatred. A hatred that grew so intense that by and by it extinguished every other feeling, till his whole lean body was filled with this hatred, till the hatred started to show in his eyes, and he lowered his head quickly, not knowing what to do. He had never killed even so much as a chicken with his own hands, but there he stood, longing to stab a man. . . .

He blinked rapidly, trying to clear his vision. When he finally succeeded, the bald guy had vanished. Slowly, feet leaden, Moustafa picked up the cigarette butt, threw it out on the pavement as if it could burn his fingers. Far down the street he could see the bald guy leisurely walking away.

In a sudden impulse, Moustafa called upstairs for his wife to handle the shop for a while. Still soaked in the sweat of fear and hatred, he followed the man, deliberately staying far enough behind that he wouldn't be noticed.

Twenty minutes later they had left the small town, wandering now through rich cornfields, the stalks tall enough for Moustafa to

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hide easily if the man should look back, but he didn't. In a flashback Moustafa remembered his own country, the stony, barren soil he worked with his brothers and father. This new country he had come to looked like paradise in comparison, but earthly paradises never seemed to be without a flaw. . . . At least out here in the open country, the heat wasn't quite as stifling as in the streets of the town, but Moustafa's sweat nevertheless continued to trickle down his back, down his forehead, burning his eyes like acid.

Finally the bald guy reached a wooden barn, a big one, boards grey and black with age. Motorbikes were parked outside, three or four battered cars. For the first time, the guy looked over his shoulder, and Moustafa had to jump between the cornstalks. He waited long, anxious minutes till he dared to venture back onto the path.

All of a sudden, deafening sounds of music rose from the barn, while Moustafa watched the old building from behind a couple of thorny bushes. Sometimes young men stepped out to pee in the grass, and sometimes a couple would walk out for fresh air, the men all strangely alike with their shaven heads, the girls in miniskirts, giggling and drinking. Moustafa felt pretty sure the party would last till late into the night. . . . Thoughtfully he went back to town.

Far away a clock struck midnight, as he returned under a pale, full moon, equipped with a kitchen knife. Yes, he had been right! The party was still in full swing, and Moustafa settled down behind his bushes, from where he could watch the door unseen.

His heart beat faster when once he saw the bald guy step out with some others, laughing in his hoarse, croaky voice. The men talked awhile, then the guy left his companions and staggered to the bushes. For a second Moustafa's heart stopped beating; he pressed his body flat to the ground, didn't dare to catch his breath. The bald guy opened his fly, urinated, walked back. Moustafa nearly fainted with relief.

He waited patiently, saw the first of them leaving at two in the morning, dead drunk, singing, joking coarsely. Cars roared off, motorcycles left, sending pebbles flying in all directions. Moustafa didn't know what he was waiting for exactly, what he would do, but he held on to his knife, and whenever he let his fingers run over the blade, he thought of little Aysha in the frilly pink dress he had given her for her birthday, and of the menacing words the bald guy had spoken when he saw the girl.

The music had long since stopped. Everything had gone quiet around the barn. Moustafa hadn't seen the bald guy leave, though the moon was shedding its silvery light amply over the fields. Slowly Moustafa rose from his cover, crept over to the barn. He jumped with fright when he heard the noise, till he realized that

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inside someone was snoring.

Hands clammy with fear, knife in shaking fingers, Moustafa sneaked up to the heavy door that no one had bothered to close. His eyes needed some time till they adapted to the dimmer light inside the wooden building, then he saw the guy. He lay sprawled on the floor, snoring loudly, reeking of stale beer and gin. Through a small window a beam of moonlight illuminated his bald head in a ghastly white light, and it gleamed like a skull.

Throat dry as the desert, stomach churning, Moustafa cautiously glanced around. Broken bottles, deformed beer cans everywhere on the earthen floor, sad remnants of the day's party. To the left, where the bald guy lay in his stupor, huge stacks of hay. On one of these, the guy's cigarettes and matches.

Not really knowing what he did, Moustafa crept closer. Terrified by the situation, the physical nearness of the man who had threatened his child, he wasn't able to control his craving for nicotine any longer.

Without letting go of the knife, he fumbled one of the cigarettes out of the pack, lit it, inhaled deeply, and would have closed his eyes with satisfaction and the sweet soothing of the smoke if he hadn't been so afraid that the bald guy would wake up.

Cigarette in his left hand, knife in his right, his mind finally seemed to calm down. The blade of the weapon reflected the moon's cold light, and Moustafa shivered at the thought of running it into this man's warm, living flesh. At this moment he realized he couldn't do it. He couldn't bend down and kill the guy in his sleep even if he deserved to be dead. . . .

Moustafa walked back to town as if recovering from a nightmare. He didn't want to think about what he would do should the bald guy show up at the shop again. He didn't want to think about what might happen to little Aysha or his wife. He didn't want to think at all, just wanted to lie down and sleep, he felt so drained.

When he reached the first houses, dark in their peaceful slumber, a siren started to wail. Automatically, Moustafa turned in his steps. The night sky glowed in a strange, fiery red, back where the barn stood.

Aware that he was still clutching the knife, Moustafa tried to remember what had become of the cigarette he had smoked while watching the bald guy sleep.

Stacks of hay, all dry. *Things burn quickly these days . . .*

His whole body started to shake.

Had his fingers betrayed him, had they done of their own accord what his soul, his mind, his religion had forbidden him to do?

As he crept into his bedroom he could hear the fire engines pass through the street. "We should have stayed at home," his wife mumbled, only half awake. "At home in Turkey." Moustafa said nothing. ●

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WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY

by Peter Lovesey

"There is a window in your life. All you have to do is open it and let the sunshine in."

Nikki listened, fascinated. She'd come here expecting a con, but the man spoke like a prophet. He had his audience enthralled. He was a brilliant speaker. Looks, perfect grooming, charisma. He had it all.

"How many times have I heard someone say, 'You should have been here yesterday. It was glorious'?" He smiled. "A comment on our English weather, but it sums up our attitude to life. 'You should have been here yesterday.' My friends, forget about yesterday. We are here *today.* Seize the day. Open that window and let the sunshine in."

The applause was wild. He'd brought them to a pitch of excitement. And this wasn't evangelism. It was about being effective in business. The setting was Lucknam Park in Wiltshire, where the government held its think-tank sessions. Companies had paid big bucks to send their upcoming executives here. Lives were being changed forever. Not least, Nikki's.

This was her window of opportunity. She'd been sent here for the weekend by the theatrical agency to help with the role play. Inspired by what she had heard, she was about to act a role of her own. She stepped to the front, scythed a path through the admirers, and placed a hand over his arm. "If you don't mind, Julian, there's someone you should meet upstairs, in your suite." To his adoring fans she said, "He'll be back, I promise."

It worked. In the lift, he said, "Who is it?"

"Me."

His amazing blue eyes widened. "I don't understand."

"I've seized the day."

Peter Lovesey's literary career began when he won a novel-writing contest in 1970. Since then he's been honored with awards of various sorts all over the world, and has gained a following as one of mystery's best historical and contemporary novelists. Despite the accolades for his longer fiction, he has always kept time and affection for the short story. He's one of the few writers who can create a memorable tale in only a few pages. †

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The moment he laughed, she knew she'd succeeded. He was still high on the reception he'd got. When they entered the suite, she put the Do Not Disturb sign over the doorknob. The sex was sensational.

They had a weekend in Paris and a Concorde trip to New York. Nikki found herself moving in circles she'd never experienced before. Royal Ascot. Henley. Her drama school training came in useful.

They married in the church in rural Dorset where her parents lived. She arrived with Daddy in a pony and trap and after the reception in Dorchester's best hotel, she and Julian were driven to the airport in a stretch limo. The honeymoon was in Bermuda. Julian paid for almost everything. Daddy couldn't have managed to spend on that scale.

"It's no problem," Julian said. "I'm ridiculously well-off. Well, *we* are now."

"You deserve to be, my darling," Nikki said. "You've brought sunshine into so many lives."

They bought a huge plot of land in Oxfordshire and had their house built to Julian's design. As well as the usual bedrooms and reception rooms, it had an office suite, gym, games room, and two pools, indoors and out. A tennis court, stables, and landscaped garden. "I don't want you ever to be bored," Julian said. "There are times when I'll be away."

Nikki was not bored. True, she'd given up her acting to devote more time to homemaking, but she could not have managed both. When Julian was at home, he was forever finding new windows of opportunity, days to seize. His energy never flagged. He got up at five-thirty and swam a mile before breakfast and made sure she was up by seven. Even in her drama-school days she hadn't risen that early. Actors work to a different pattern.

He had each day worked out. "We'll plant the new rockery this morning and clear the leaves out of the pool. This afternoon I'll need your help fitting the curtains in the fourth bedroom. This evening the Mountnessings are coming for dinner and I want to prepare an Italian meal, so we'll need to fit in some shopping."

Nikki suggested more than once that most of these jobs could be done by staff. They could afford to get people in.

"That goes against my principles," Julian said. "There's immense satisfaction in doing the jobs ourselves."

"One day I'd like to sit by the pool we keep so clean," she said.

"Doing what, my love?"

"Just sitting—or better still, lying."

He laughed. He thought she was joking.

In bed, he showed no sign of exhaustion. Nikki, twelve years younger than he, was finding it a trial to match this energy.

At such a pace, it didn't take long for the house to be in perfect shape, all the curtains and carpets fitted, the pictures hung. Nikki

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had looked forward to some time to herself when the jobs were done, but she hadn't reckoned on maintenance.

"Maintenance?"

"Keeping it up to the mark," Julian explained. "We don't let the grass grow under our feet."

In the middle of their love-making the same night, the thought occurred to her that he regarded this, too, as maintenance. From that moment, the magic went out of their marriage.

What a relief when he went to America for a week on a lecture tour. He left her a maintenance list, but she ignored it and lounged by the pool every day watching the leaves settle on the surface and sink to the bottom.

When he returned he was as energised as ever. Jet lag was unknown to Julian's metabolism. "So much to attend to," he said. "If I didn't know better, I'd almost think you'd ignored that list I gave you."

He was as active as usual in bed. And up before five next morning. He'd heard some house martins building a nest under the eaves above the bedroom window. They made an appalling mess if you didn't do something about it.

When Nikki drew back the bedroom curtain she saw his suntanned legs right outside. He'd brought out his lightweight aluminium ladder. His feet, in gleaming white trainers and socks, were on one of the highest rungs. She had to push extra hard to open the window and force the ladder backwards, but she succeeded. And let the sunshine in. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

A	C	A	D	■	A	G	E	D	■	N	O	M	A	D
L	O	W	E	■	D	A	V	E	■	E	L	A	T	E
A	R	A	L	■	A	L	A	N	■	V	I	L	E	R
■	D	Y	I	N	G	O	N	T	H	E	V	I	N	E
■	■	■	■	A	E	R	■	■	I	R	E	■	■	■
T	H	A	T	I	■	E	M	I	R	■	R	A	C	Y
H	A	B	E	A	S	■	A	L	E	A	■	R	O	O
A	W	O	R	D	A	F	T	E	R	D	Y	I	N	G
N	E	D	■	S	L	I	T	■	S	A	M	E	D	I
E	D	E	R	■	A	R	E	A	■	G	A	L	E	S
■	■	■	E	A	R	■	■	G	A	I	■	■	■	■
A	F	E	W	D	Y	I	N	G	W	O	R	D	S	■
F	I	L	I	A	■	M	A	I	A	■	A	R	A	T
A	L	A	R	M	■	B	E	E	R	■	M	O	V	E
R	E	N	E	S	■	E	S	S	E	■	S	P	E	D

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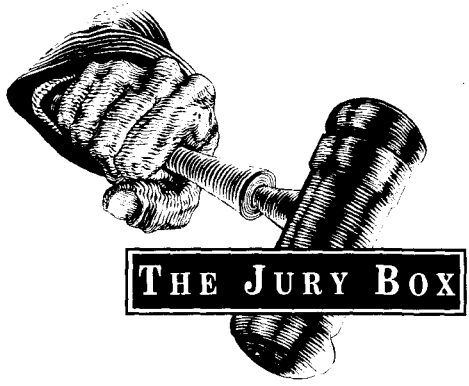

by Jon L. Breen

By evidence of books in print, media adaptations on tape and DVD, and slighting references by her literary descendants, Agatha Christie arguably remains the world's most popular mystery writer. But with all the fame accorded Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, the books about Tuppence and Tommy Beresford, whose television incarnation was far less captivating, are sometimes overlooked and undervalued. Few detectives presented in contemporary stories age in real time (Francis M. Nevins's Loren Mensing is a rare example), but Tuppence and Tommy's widely spaced adventures carried them from early twenties to old age. Recent audio releases of three novels from the series show how expertly Christie could combine the well-hidden surprises and fair-play detection of her other books with international intrigue and thriller trappings.

The Young Adventurers were formidable in their post-WWI debut, *The Secret Adversary* (1922), and even more impressive in their middle-aged WWII comeback, *N or M* (1941), one of Christie's finest novels from her peak period. Their final appearance, *Postern of Fate* (1973), was the last book the author completed in her lifetime and one of her poorest, but even it has a certain elegiac charm. All three of these are available in three-hour audiotape versions (Audio Renaissance, $12.95 each), as is *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968), released and noted here earlier. If you can't abide abridgments, even when delightfully read by Samantha Bond, the novels are also in print in paperback. In the same format for the same price comes an abridgment, read by Carole Boyd, of *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), a first-rate Poirot case and one of Christie's cleverest mosaics of misdirection, including some elements not evident in the excellent TV adaptation.

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Christie's most famous non-series novel, *And Then There Were None* (1939; also known by *Ten Little Indians* and a much ruder title) is available in a new trade paperback reprint (St. Martin's Griffin, $12.95). Coincidentally, the opening of that classic's stage version figures in the latest from one of our foremost historical-mystery writers.

**** Max Allan Collins: *The London Blitz Murders,* Berkley, $6.99. If falling bombs aren't enough problem for the residents of 1942 London, a latter-day Jack the Ripper is exploiting the blackouts for his own deadly purposes. Agatha Christie Mallowan and Sir Bernard Spilsbury, both brilliantly captured with the author's usual meticulous research and powers of characterization, share the sleuthing load. Not until near the end will you realize what an astonishing job this is, combining expert storytelling with a possibly unique variation on Christie-style misdirection and an acute commentary on classical detective fiction. Be sure to observe the author's advice *not* to read the concluding bibliographic essay first. (Rare anachronistic note: I don't believe people of the early 1940s used the term *chauvinism* in its contemporary sense of male arrogance.)

**** Boris Akunin: *Murder on the Leviathan,* translated from the Russian by Andrew Bromfield, Random House, $21.95. In another sort of Christie homage, a murderer lurks among the passengers and crew of the luxury steamship *Leviathan* on its 1878 maiden voyage from Southampton to Calcutta. Principal sleuth is Russian diplomat Erast Fandorin, hero of ten novels, of which this is the second to appear in English translation. The multiple revelations and reversals of the latter chapters display Golden Age gamesmanship at its most playful.

**** Erle Stanley Gardner: *The Danger Zone and Other Stories,* Crippen & Landru, $29 cloth, $17 trade paper. If Gardner had never invented Perry Mason or Cool and Lam, he would still be celebrated as one of the great pulp mystery writers, as shown in eleven previously unreprinted tales, chosen by editor Bill Pronzini to represent one-shot and short-series detectives. Most were published in 1930s magazines with a single 1952 entry from *This Week.* It's a first-rate sampling of Gardner's humor, social observation, and craftsmanship, including one story, "Barney Killigen," with a Mason-style courtroom climax. Happily, several more collections are planned by the editor and publisher.

*** Tess Gerritsen: *Body Double,* Ballantine, $24.95. The Boston team of pathologist Maura Isles, whose previously unknown identical twin sister becomes a murder victim outside her home, and police detective Jane Rizzoli, now very pregnant, return in a deviously

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plotted and expertly executed thriller that takes full advantage of the current fascination with forensic detection. Gerritsen gets extra points for avoiding a trite climactic situation she seems to be leading up to. There's plenty of menace and suspense going on without it.

*** Anne Perry: *The Shifting Tide,* Ballantine, $25.95. Victorian sleuth William Monk, now a London private detective, takes on a case of murder and stolen ivory for a shipping magnate, and an outbreak of plague causes wife Hester Latterly's clinic for prostitutes and other street people to be quarantined lest the epidemic spread. One of the grimmest entries in the series has a redeeming leaven of humor and a thrilling seagoing climax.

*** Michael Bowen: *Unforced Error,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. Civil War re-enactors, the mass-market paperback publishing business, and an unusual copyright issue (but not, despite the title, tennis) are involved in the latest from a consistently witty, literate, and informative master of well-made puzzles and semi-farcical plot complications. In referencing their husband-and-wife detective team predecessors, Reb and Melissa Pennyworth should know Mrs. North's first name was Pam, not Susan.

*** Leo Bruce: *Death in the Middle Watch,* Academy Chicago, $21.95. In a novel first published in Britain in 1974, schoolmaster-turned-sleuth Carolus Deene looks into murder on a summer holiday cruise. Bruce (pseudonym of Rupert Croft-Cooke) was one of the last active of the British formalists who emerged in the 1930s, and his penultimate detective novel has the customary bright dialogue, sharp character drawing, and practiced mystification. (One unsolved mystery: Why does Deene invite his disagreeable former headmaster to join him on the cruise, apart from the author's desire to get another continuing character into the book?)

** Kay Hooper: *Hunting Fear,* Bantam, $25. In a work that is either fantasy or science fiction depending on your views of the paranormal, psychic profiler Lucas Jordan, of the FBI's Special Crimes Unit, encounters an old love while matching wits with a serial kidnapper and killer in North Carolina. In common with many successful "brand-name" thriller writers, Hooper offers no special distinction of style or characterization, but her unerring story sense and ability to keep the pages flying can't be denied. The biggest problem with psychic detection: To keep the plot on the rails, the author can decide arbitrarily in what situations the psychic sleuths can and cannot exercise their gifts.

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In a Pool of His Own Blood

by John H. Dirckx

Mystery has many subgenres; John H. Dirckx sticks to one: the whodunit. He is also a medical doctor with a practice in Dayton, Ohio, the father of five daughters, a grandfather, an avid reader in nine languages, and a book collector. Mr. Dirckx's series stories for *EQMM* employ African-American police detective Cyrus Auburn in settings where he is often not welcome but always on the mark. ¶

On this Saturday morning in September, a ceaseless swirl and eddy of humanity, always changing and yet somehow always seeming pretty much the same, thronged the aisles of Zwelfinger's Department Store. Working mothers sought bargains in children's clothes. Businessmen liberated from the weekday grind cast tired eyes over displays of sport shirts, golf clubs, or gardening tools. Unshaven collegians with hangovers shopped for CDs to feed their ghetto blasters. And everywhere loomed the inevitable idlers and loiterers, seemingly doing no harm but probably up to no good.

Because the weather was damp and gloomy, the proportion of serious shoppers, particularly on the main level of the store, was smaller than usual. Even on the fifth floor, which was devoted to jewelry, fine furnishings, better housewares, and similar enticements for the upper classes, a substantial horde of seedy-looking characters wandered without apparent motivation, singly and in pairs, among the racks and counters.

Ron Stiggle walked past the jewelry department with a mere glance through the glass doors. His progress toward the elevator was suddenly arrested by a middle-aged woman, very square of jaw and broad of shoulder, who was fumbling with the components of a cappuccino machine that lay strewn across a counter.

"Can you show me how these go together?" she asked him, with a German accent as thick as a mouthful of Wiener schnitzel.

"I don't work here," said Ron, and tried to move on.

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"No, but you *know,"* she insisted with a vaguely seductive simper. Under her heavy makeup she came across like Godzilla doing an impersonation of Marlene Dietrich, or maybe it was the other way around.

Again Stiggle attempted to squeeze past her. As she turned away from the counter to stop him, she somehow managed to scatter half a dozen parts over the polished terrazzo floor. "Did you see what I did?" she crowed, almost as if courting applause for her clumsiness.

But he was already past her and pressing on again toward the elevators. As he approached them, the doors of the one on the right opened and four or five shoppers got out. Stiggle followed a man into the now empty elevator, and was followed in turn by a woman with a little girl, and, just before the automatic doors swept shut, by another man and another woman. He noted idly that the second woman was the one who'd asked him about the cappuccino machine.

Something was wrong with the fluorescent light in the elevator. It hummed and flickered, alternately plunging the interior into darkness and bathing it in a ghastly greenish glare, but never providing full illumination. As the car started downward, somebody's wrist-watch alarm peeped faintly in the semidarkness to announce the hour of 11 A.M.

The stream of tinny, crescendoless music from the speaker in the ceiling of the car ceased as a recorded announcement was piped throughout the store: "Shoppers, Zwelfinger's is featuring specials today in the following departments: Lawn and Garden, Cameras, Sports and Recreation, and Fitness Equipment. Ladies, you won't want to miss our fall display of leisurewear on the main level. Shoppers, if you don't have a charge account with us, open one today and receive, absolutely free, a featherweight windbreaker in your choice of five colors or Tartan plaid. That's Zwelfinger's way of saying thank you for letting us supply all your shopping needs."

The elevator reached the main level, without having stopped at any of the intervening floors, just as the music came back on. When the doors slid open, there was a moment of hesitation during which nobody moved. Then the woman with the child stepped in front of one of the men, who had turned sideways to make room for them to pass. The other woman started to follow her, then abruptly screamed and twisted aside as Ron Stiggle collapsed against her from behind like a sack of cement. Further screams followed. One of the men took a walkie-talkie out of his pocket and stretched the telescoping antenna up to its full length.

The ambulance from the Department of Fire and Rescue, its siren silent, was just leaving Zwelfinger's parking garage when Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn pulled into the garage from DeWire

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Street and found a space on the second level. The store entrance on this level was locked, and a sign informed him that the store would be closed until noon tomorrow. He took the stairs down one flight. A uniformed guard at the main level let him in after a glance at his badge.

As Auburn entered the store, an announcement was being made on the public-address system. "Attention, shoppers. The store is closing in five minutes. Please take your purchases to a cashier immediately. We're sorry for any inconvenience. The store will reopen at noon tomorrow."

Moving against the tide of departing shoppers, Auburn made his way toward the elevators. Only one of the two was in use. The other was completely blocked from view by a temporary row of screens—panels of plywood, eight feet high by four wide, covered with mauve and beige bunting and mounted on wheeled bases. Auburn squeezed around the end of the barricade and found Patrolman Carl Bystrom hugging a clipboard to his chest and conversing with a rubber-gloved housekeeping worker who stood by, armed with a body-fluids kit.

Bystrom caught Auburn's eye and directed his attention to the elevator with a nod, without interrupting his suave assurance to the worker that the police knew quite well how to clean up bloodstains, and would do so when they had finished gathering evidence at the scene and had taken the necessary photographs.

The elevator door was locked open, and within its shallow cavity, fitfully illuminated by a flickering overhead light, lay the body of a man, almost but not quite flat on his back. His polyester shirt had been slit up the front from hem to collar, presumably by the paramedics.

"They didn't even unpack their gear," said Bystrom at his elbow. "Just turned him enough to see the stab wound in his back. Don't step in the blood."

The large, irregular pool around the body gleamed dark and slick as molten tar in the weird, fitful light. "I think I'll stay out here. Find the knife yet?"

"No, sir."

"Have the people been searched?"

"Not yet. Not by me. Three of them are females."

"Where are they now?"

Bystrom waved the clipboard. "Dollinger's got them upstairs in a conference room, writing out statements. One of them's an undercover man from Spahn."

"So I heard. Let me see." He took the clipboard from Bystrom and ran his eye down the list of names and addresses. Joseph Damson—that was the man from Spahn. Colleen Kendall and Marylou Kendall, both living at the same address. Herbert Sharp,

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from Pittsburgh. Hannelore Strumpf. "Which one's the kid?"

"Colleen. She's eight."

The victim's driver's license was secured under the clip. Ronald J. Stiggle, local, age thirty-nine. "You don't have anything on next of kin yet, do you?"

"No, sir."

"We'll let the coroner worry about that. As soon as either the guy from the coroner's office or the evidence technician from the crime lab gets here, find a phone and call these names in to Records. How do I find this conference room?"

As Auburn took the deserted stairway to the mezzanine, he heard the announcement of the store closing repeated, only now the expression used was "immediately."

The crime he'd been sent to investigate was one of those that strained credulity to the utmost—a fatal stabbing committed in an elevator crowded with people, with no clues to the identity of the killer and not even any sign of a knife. Barring some pretty fantastic trickery, one of the people on Bystrom's list must be the murderer.

The room where the witnesses were being held was part of the managerial office suite on the mezzanine level. A uniformed guard from Spahn Merchants' Security stopped Auburn at the door. After a glance at his identification, the guard conducted him through a side passage to a small, darkened room with a long window along one wall.

Through this window Auburn had a view of the conference room, furnished with a long table and plush chairs, where the witnesses were putting the finishing touches on their written statements while waiting to be interviewed. All except the little girl, who was trying to see how far back she could tip her chair without needing a trip to the hospital, and one of the men, who was giving Patrolman Fritz Dollinger a hard time about something. His voice was coming faintly through a speaker somewhere overhead.

"Can they hear us?" Auburn mouthed silently to the guard.

"No, sir. And that's one-way glass."

"So I figured."

"Joe wants out of there bad," said the guard. "He's one of our guys, Joe Damson—always works undercover. He don't think he ought to be treated like a suspect."

Auburn studied Joe Damson through the glass. He was about thirty-five, thin and stoop-shouldered, and he was trying to persuade Dollinger to let him out of the room with the wheedling manner of a street beggar trying to cadge money for a drink. He possessed at least one quality of a successful undercover store detective: With his faded jeans and what might have been a crew cut four or five months ago, he looked like a down-and-outer who wasn't above a bit of shoplifting himself if the opportunity came his way.

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"I'd better talk to him first. Is there someplace I can interview these people?"

"Yes, sir. There's an empty office they said you could use right through there."

Auburn went back to the door of the conference room and conferred briefly with Dollinger, asking him to call headquarters and arrange for a female officer to come to the store and search the women. Then he led Joe Damson to the unused office. The furnishings here were Spartan, and the window, which faced out on the street, was caked with grime on both its inner and outer surfaces.

Damson insisted on shaking hands with Auburn. "Like I was telling Fritz in there," he said, "I'm on the side of the angels here. I do undercover security for Spahn, sort of back up the uniform guys."

"I understand. That's why I wanted to talk to you first. Have a seat." He read over Damson's statement quickly. "I see you were the last one into the elevator before the door closed, up on the fifth floor."

"That's right." Damson pursed his lips and blew out a massive puff of air.

"That's where it gets embarrassing," he said. "I rode all the way down with eyes front. I couldn't see anything but the door three inches from my nose. I didn't hear anything going on behind me. When the door opened on the main floor, I stepped aside to let the ladies off first, and then one of them started howling like a hyena. I turned around and here was this poor guy, Stiggle, draped over the other passengers like a wet rug. I thought he had a heart attack till I saw the blood running out of him like somebody turned on a spigot in his back. . . ."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"No, sir. Not to my knowledge. But, hey, there's six, eight thousand people in and out of here every day."

"And you didn't see any sign of a knife in the elevator, then or later?"

"Absolutely not."

"Were you waiting when the elevator doors opened up on the fifth floor?"

"No. Like I said, I got there right before the doors closed."

"So it's possible Stiggle was already dead—maybe propped up against the back wall of the elevator—before it even got to that floor?"

Damson scratched his forehead in thought. The fourth finger of his left hand was stiff and slightly deformed, and there was a tattoo on the inside of his left wrist—three Chinese characters, or reasonable facsimiles thereof. "I guess it's possible. You'd have to ask the other folks that was in the elevator."

"Do you know any of them? I mean, have you seen them in the store before, or had any trouble with any of them?"

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"That big blonde with the German accent comes in pretty often, and she's always like a bull in a china shop. Argues with the salespeople, complains about everything, usually manages to break something. The rest of them? Like I said, I see a blue million people in here every day. And I'm not looking at their faces, you know?

"My job is to catch boosters slipping things inside their clothes. A necktie up the old sleeve, a pair of earrings down the old blouse. This kind of weather, you watch for the ones that come in without a raincoat or an umbrella, and when they leave, they've got both. Hey, buddy, can I get out of here? I mean, it's not like you could ever think I killed this guy or anything."

Auburn eyed him good-naturedly. "You know the routine as well as I do, Mr. Damson," he said. "Until we identify the murderer, everybody who was on the scene is a suspect. If there was an archbishop in that elevator, he'd have to be searched just like everybody else."

"Okay," said Damson, standing up. "Let's get it over with. But after this I hope you're not going to put me back in that room with the one-way mirror. Hey, buddy, there's a killer in there."

Auburn went over Damson carefully. He found a small walkie-talkie and a leatherette folder containing a plastic badge and Damson's photo identification as a private security agent. He found no knife or anything else that could have been used to stab Stiggle in the back.

"Take a look down there in the street," said Auburn. "That's a remote TV unit parked in the fire lane. They're going to be poking around here, interviewing anybody connected in any way with the store. If I don't treat you just like all the other folks who were in that elevator, they're going to want to know why. If they find out why, you'll be on the six-o'clock news. No more undercover work for you, Joe. You'll have to wear a uniform with creases in the trousers, stand up straight, get a haircut once in a while . . ."

"I think you're saying I gotta go back in the tank with the other goldfish."

Auburn took Damson back to the conference room. He decided to talk to Mrs. Kendall and her daughter next.

"Come on, Colleen," said Mrs. Kendall. "Bring your stuff. We've got to get home for lunch."

The Kendalls were dressed almost alike in fall colors and each was laden with a well-stuffed shopping bag. Mrs. Kendall had the bustling air of a mother hen. The child was pale and thin, with big eyes that had faint purplish shadows under them, like a waif in a Red Cross poster. Dollinger hadn't given Colleen a statement form to fill out.

"This shouldn't take too long," Auburn told the mother. "It's just routine, but with a homicide we can't cut any corners."

"I understand." She put down her bag and settled into a chair.

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"I'm trying to get this one fixed up with some decent winter clothes. She's growing like a weed. All her school stuff from last year is either too small or worn out."

"Where do you go to school, honey?" asked Auburn.

Colleen sat on the front edge of her chair wiggling her feet in silence.

"Don't be such a mouse, Colleen. Tell the man where you go to school. Can't you say 'Alden-Riverside'?" Colleen smiled demurely but remained silent. "I wish you were this quiet at home."

Auburn looked over Mrs. Kendall's statement, which consisted of a mere three sentences. "I wonder if I could get just a little more detail from you, Mrs. Kendall. Was there anybody in the elevator when you got in?"

"A man and a woman. I don't think they were together. I mean—"

"I know what you mean. What did the man look like?"

She jerked her head in the direction of the conference room. "He was the one you just talked to, in the dark blue T-shirt."

"You're sure he was already in the elevator when you got in?"

"Oh yes. I made sure I got between him and Colleen. He looked pretty scruffy to me."

"And then some more people got on before the elevator started down?"

"Two more men. One of them was the one in the burgundy shirt that got killed. I don't think they were together, either."

"And where did they stand?"

"We moved over to the right to let them in, and they sort of squeezed behind us, just about the time the doors closed. Don't touch that, Colleen. It's all dusty. And stop clicking your gum."

Auburn made notes on a three-by-five-inch file card. "And you didn't notice anything happening until the elevator got to the first floor?"

"No. There was something wrong with the light in there. It kept flashing off and on. It was creepy, wasn't it, Colleen?"

The child responded affirmatively with a series of wildly exaggerated nods.

"Could we go now?" asked Mrs. Kendall. "We've still got some shopping to do, and I need to get home and fix Colleen and her dad some lunch."

"I'll have to ask you to stay a bit longer," said Auburn. "I'd like you to add a little more to your statement. Just write down what you told me about the other people in the elevator—when they got on and where they stood." She reached for the paper. "And I'll need to look through your shopping bags."

She didn't like that a bit, and she told him so.

"A man was fatally stabbed in that elevator," Auburn reminded her. "And we haven't found the weapon yet. The murderer may

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have slipped it into your bag. Or Colleen's."

The girl's eyes grew round and she stopped fidgeting, but only momentarily.

Mrs. Kendall wrote with one eye on the paper and the other on Auburn as he carefully went through the merchandise in the bags. He wasn't so hung up on the crime of homicide that he neglected to compare each article with the corresponding receipt. Everything jibed perfectly—except the bloodstained knife and the black quilted cooking mitt that he found in Colleen's bag.

"I assume neither of you put these here?" Auburn said. The only reply was a breathless murmuring from Mrs. Kendall, which might have been prayer.

A paper bag containing knitted socks showed some streaks of dried blood on the outside, but the merchandise inside hadn't been stained. Auburn left the knife and the mitt in the shopping bag and wrote the date and his initials on both bags. He found Patrolman Bystrom hovering outside in the corridor.

"Is the evidence technician here yet?" he asked Bystrom.

"Sergeant Kestrel. He's down there trying to fix the light in the elevator."

"That figures. I want you to take a look at this stuff and then turn it over directly to Kestrel and tell him where you got it. Watch out for the point."

Bystrom's initial comment was not a prayer. "This knife looks brand-new," he said, peering into the bag.

"It is. There's a price label on the other side of the handle. If you see that guard out there, ask him if he'll bring Mrs. Kendall another bag for her stuff."

Bystrom took charge of the evidence. "The owner of the store wants to talk to you, Sergeant. He says it's urgent. His office is around on the other side of the drinking fountain."

As soon as Mrs. Kendall had packed up her purchases again, Auburn led her and Colleen back to the conference room.

He was thinking fast. The mitt was for the left hand, and the four people he'd seen writing in the conference room were all right-handed. The use of a knife presumably stolen inside the store this morning suggested an unpremeditated crime with an impromptu weapon. And although he felt sure the Kendalls weren't directly involved in the stabbing, finding the murder weapon in Colleen's bag seemed to dispose of the idea that the murderer might have fled the scene, leaving Stiggle dead in the elevator before it started down on that last trip to the first floor.

Before continuing with his interviews, Auburn went around the corner to the executive offices to see what urgent business the store owner had with him.

Zwelfinger's was the oldest surviving department store in the

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downtown area, and the only one without a branch at any of the suburban malls. Everybody in town who read the newspapers or watched TV knew that three generations of Zwelfingers had operated the business, and that Peter Paul Zwelfinger III was the currently reigning monarch.

A secretary whisked Auburn immediately into a high-ceilinged office with two tall windows facing the street. The furniture here was massive and old, and a Persian rug rather than carpet covered the hardwood floor. The clock on the wall had a two-foot pendulum behind a glass door. Auburn wouldn't have been surprised to see a brass spittoon in the corner.

Zwelfinger was talking on the phone at an old-fashioned mahogany roll-top desk, which had probably belonged to the founder of the dynasty. He was a heavy, intense man with a pencil-line moustache, bulgy eyes, and wavy hair bunched up in ducktails above his ears to conceal the sparse patch on top. As soon as Auburn appeared, he got off the phone.

"Sit down, Officer," he said, and it was an order rather than an invitation. "There's something you need to know." He rearranged some papers on his desk with hands that shook. "Ron Stiggle was working in the store as an undercover security agent."

"Working for Spahn?"

"Working for me. I hired him privately, and I'm going to tell you why." The upper edge of Zwelfinger's stiff collar cut into his neck, which formed a bloated swelling above it that quivered like a balloon full of water when he talked. "The amount of theft I've had to put up with in the last six months is outrageous. This place is crawling with so-called security people from Spahn, and yet the leaks go on. Do you know what that says to me? It says my own people are robbing me blind."

"Have you had—"

"You've been around long enough to know how this security thing works. The salespeople have strict instructions never to get involved in the activities of a store detective, no matter what they're doing, so obviously they have to know who the detectives are. As soon as a new undercover guy or gal from Spahn comes on board, a member of my staff takes them around and introduces them to every salesperson in the store. But knowing all the undercover security people means the staff can easily get away with some shoplifting of their own. And who's to say the undercover people aren't doing some of the pilfering themselves?"

"Who else in the store knew—"

"Nobody. I found out about Stiggle from another business here in town that had used him and got good results for their money. I met him at an office over on Stamford Boulevard and paid him out of a private account."

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"How long—"

"Couple of months. He started right after the Fourth of July weekend."

Auburn made a note on a file card. "Were you thinking that Stiggle's death was related to this undercover work?" he asked.

"Well, it seems pretty obvious, doesn't it? I mean, I'd hate to think he got stabbed in my elevator by some homicidal maniac who didn't know him from Adam. What kind of publicity would that be for the store?"

The phone on Zwelfinger's desk buzzed. He made a face and picked up the receiver. His scowl grew more fierce as he listened. "Send her in. There may be a connection."

The door opened and a young woman, apparently on the brink of hysteria, almost fell into the room. Her wild orange hair, damp with mousse, looked like a heap of carrot scrapings ready for the garbage can. Her nametag read "Hedy Wein. Jewelry." Auburn was beginning to feel like an alien in a fantasy realm.

"Come on in and shut the door," said Zwelfinger. "What's missing?"

"You're not going to believe this, Mr. Zwelfinger." She kept shifting her weight from one leg to the other and shaking her hands as if they were asleep. "It's the Bellarte ensemble for October. It's gone."

"What do you mean, gone? Is the display case still locked?"

"Yes, sir. But—but—"

"Make some sense, girl! If the case is still locked, how did the set get out of it?"

"I don't know. The box it comes in is still there, but everything inside it is fake. When the lid of the box is closed, you can only see the crest of the tiara and the bottom of the pendant, and it looks okay through the plastic. But when you open the lid you can see it's just cheap metal and glass."

"How many people did you show the set to this morning?"

"Three. But I'll swear none of them actually had it in their hands—"

"That's the usual story when a pennyweighter's been at work." He sighed and muttered, half to himself and half to Auburn, "She has a degree in marketing, and she gives away the farm."

"I don't understand." The girl frowned as if she'd been called a bad name. "What's a pennyweighter?"

"It's a thief who substitutes a worthless fake for the stolen article," explained Auburn. "To delay detection of the theft. Has anybody touched the fake jewelry box since you found it?"

"No, it's locked in the display case."

"Where is your jewelry department?" asked Auburn. "What floor?"

"Fifth," they said together.

"What about kitchen equipment? Knives and such?"

"Same floor," said Zwelfinger.

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Auburn stood up. "I'd like to have this young lady take a look through the one-way mirror at the people who were in the elevator when Stiggle was murdered," he said. "To see if she recognizes any of them as somebody she showed this . . . what did you call it?"

"Bellarte ensemble," said Hedy. "It's a seven-piece set—two bracelets, a pair of earrings, a wrist watch, a necklace with pendant, and a tiara. Each piece has a cluster of diamonds around a birthstone."

"The manufacturer sends us a different one every month," said Zwelfinger, "and frankly, we use them mainly to entice customers into the jewelry department. After they've drooled over the Bellarte ensemble for a while, the prices on the other things don't look so steep. It retails for sixteen-nine."

"Sixteen . . . ?"

"Thousand, nine hundred."

In the conference room, the people from the elevator were still fidgeting under the blandly watchful eye of Patrolman Dollinger. Hedy Wein studied them carefully before stating with certainty that none of them had been in the jewelry department that morning.

Auburn used the phone on Zwelfinger's desk to call headquarters and report that a major theft had taken place around the same time as the murder.

When he got back to the conference room, the large-framed blond woman was apparently still working on her statement, so he called the only other remaining witness, Herbert Sharp from Pittsburgh. As he led Sharp to the office he was using for interviews, he expressed his regret at the inconvenience.

"That's okay, Officer. You've got your job to do. Just so I'm out of here by about two o'clock. I've got my sister's car out there in the parking garage, and she has to get to work."

They reached the office and took seats. A light drizzle had started outside again, blotching and smearing the muck on the outside of the window.

While Auburn was getting out a fresh file card, he ran his eye over Sharp, who appeared to be about forty-five. He was dressed in a long-sleeved sport shirt and slacks, both dark brown, and he was wearing a plain wedding band. "What do you do in Pittsburgh, Mr. Sharp?"

"Wholesale paint and varnish. I was in town yesterday on business and I stayed over for the weekend with Nance and her husband. Thought I'd stop in the store, pick up a present for them before I went back, and then—this." He gestured toward the statement in Auburn's hand.

"And you didn't even find a present."

"And now the store's closed."

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"I notice you say here that you were the last one into the elevator before it started down."

"That's right. The poor guy that got stabbed stepped in right before I did. The other folks sort of broke ranks to let him in, and I was left with my nose hanging out the door for a while until they moved back. The door closed, and down we went, and the next thing I knew, those two women were screaming bloody murder. And that's exactly what it was, too."

He gave a vivid description of the confusion and horror that followed the opening of the elevator doors. "I thought he had just passed out, and I tried to ease him to the floor. Then I saw the blood. Buckets of it, all over my hands." He held up his hands to the light and inspected them. "I hope I got it all off."

Sharp declined to speculate as to which of the passengers in the elevator could possibly have stabbed Stiggle, or how they could have done it in such a confined space without being observed by at least one of the others. Under repeated questioning he stuck to his story of where he and the other passengers had been standing, which essentially matched Mrs. Kendall's version.

Although the presumptive murder weapon had been found, there was now stolen jewelry to be accounted for. Before taking Sharp back to the conference room, Auburn searched him carefully and found nothing.

The last of the witnesses, Hannelore Strumpf, had finally finished writing up her statement and was standing next to her chair staring at herself in the one-way window, which on this side looked like a mirror. Although Auburn's acquaintance with Wagnerian opera was sketchy at best, this woman put him in mind of an ageing Brunhilde struggling through her last season. She picked up a bulging shopping bag and followed him to the office with a palpable air of reluctance.

"I'm sorry to spoil your whole morning," Auburn told her. "Is it Mrs. Strumpf or Miss?"

Her reply, if such it could be called, sounded something like "Awkh! Dawkh!" He glanced over her statement in some trepidation lest he might need an interpreter to read it. When they got to the office she seemed more interested in studying the view from the window than in answering questions.

The interview was a sore trial for both of them. Ms. Strumpf's every word and gesture registered indignation and hostility. She'd been a naturalized citizen of the United States for twenty-four years and never before had she been subjected to such treatment. Her voice rising in pitch and volume with each remark, and her syntax growing ever more scrambled, she informed him that she was tired and hungry and that if she wasn't released at once she would hire a lawyer.

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With considerable difficulty, Auburn extracted a more or less coherent account of her observations during the crucial elevator ride. But the experience of having a dead man collapse across her back seemed to have driven out any clear recollection of the events immediately preceding it. There were already people in the elevator when she got in, and there were other people in front of her by the time the doors closed—people were shifting around to make space. Which of the people were standing where she wouldn't attempt to state.

Just when her mood had settled down to one of mildly smouldering antagonism, Auburn touched off a fresh explosion by asking permission to examine her purchases. She threw back her shoulders like a lady wrestler about to spring, and only by the exercise of all the diplomacy at his command did Auburn avert a fresh fit of screaming.

When he took Ms. Strumpf back to the conference room, he found that reinforcements had arrived from headquarters in the form of Lieutenant Howell Dunbar and Officer Georgie Wales. Dunbar, chief of the Robbery and Theft Division, had pulled weekend duty as first watch commander. Wales was there to search the women.

"See you a minute, Cy?" Dunbar shepherded him into a quiet corner of the office suite. "I just talked to The Preppy downstairs." (For reasons unknown to the generality of mankind, "The Preppy" was Dunbar's private name for Sergeant Kestrel, head of the crime lab.) "He's taking the elevator apart to see if the killer might have got away through the hatch in the roof. I told him he's been reading too many stories about guys that got trampled by a herd of elephants in a hermetically sealed telephone booth."

"Does he have the knife and the mitt?"

"He does. That's what I wanted to see you about. Do you know what you've got down there in that elevator?" He fixed Auburn with a withering stare, like a schoolteacher grilling a pupil who forgot to do his homework.

Dunbar could be trying when he was in this mood, but Auburn met his gaze steadily. "It looks like a homicide to me," he said.

"What you've got, Cy, is a successful example of the infantryman's standard procedure for taking out a sentry. You sneak up behind your man, you put your left hand over his mouth to muffle an outcry, and you drive your knife in under the bottom rib on the right side. A glove is handy if you don't want to get a couple of fingers bitten off. You hold the knife straight while it's going in, and you twist it a quarter turn while it's coming out. Gets the big artery that goes to the kidney. Instant shock, death in two or three minutes. One of the guys in that elevator is a vet, Cy. Or a deserter. He's done this before. Or ripped up a lot of dummies."

Auburn had no doubt that Dunbar knew exactly what he was talking about. He had seen active duty in Vietnam and held the

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rank of a full colonel in the Army Reserve.

"Records is running background checks on the people in the elevator," Dunbar told him. "I don't know how far back they'll be able to go on the German woman. If she is a woman."

Auburn briefed Dunbar and Wales, filled in some details about the faked Bellarte ensemble, and showed them the empty office he'd been using for interviews. Then he took Dunbar to Zwelfinger's office and made introductions.

"I notice a lot of your staff are still here in the store," said Dunbar.

"They should *all* be here. Even though the store is closed till tomorrow, I told the department heads to keep their full-time employees for the remainder of the shift, at least until further notice. I'm going to have to pay them either way. It's bad enough to lose business by locking the doors, but I'm not going to pay more than fifty workers to go home and mow the lawn or spend the afternoon at the ballgame."

"Sounds like you've got a union."

"*They've* got a union, and believe me, they're bleeding me white." He lost his train of thought momentarily as he realized that both of the men he was talking to were African-American.

"So most of the sales staff who were on duty this morning are still here?"

"Should be."

"I understand your jewelry clerk took a look through the one-way glass at the people who were in that elevator with Stiggle. I'd like to have all the rest of your staff do the same."

Zwelfinger mused and mumbled.

"Let me explain," said Dunbar. "You've had two major crimes committed here within the space of an hour or so. We don't know yet if there's a connection, but it seems probable. There was no stolen jewelry on any of our witnesses, or on the victim. But if one of those people snatched your Bellarte ensemble this morning, they could have ditched it, or slipped it to a confederate, before getting into that elevator.

"Now, the motive behind the theft of the jewelry is obvious. But until we establish the motive for the murder, we're up against a stone wall. We're not going to show any of your staff Stiggle's body, but we have his driver's license photo. One or two of them may remember something when they look over those other people who were in the elevator. If we're lucky, maybe they'll even have seen Stiggle talking to one of the others."

"All right," said Zwelfinger. "We might as well keep them occupied so they don't start inventing raging toothaches and dying grandmothers to get out of here before lunchtime."

Dunbar looked at the clock. "About lunch. We're not going to be able to hold these people here much longer without making an

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arrest. If one of them figures that out and walks away, they'll all go. Can we feed them some lunch here? At city expense?"

"There's a coffee shop on the mezzanine. And food and beverage machines on the fourth floor."

While Dunbar was arranging with Dollinger and Bystrom for the parading of the staff through the observation room and the feeding of the suspects, Officer Wales flagged down Auburn. "I just searched the Kendalls," she said. "They're still back in that office. The mom wants to talk to you."

Mrs. Kendall's mood wasn't quite as placid as it had been a half-hour earlier, and her patience was obviously wearing thin. "My little girl has a seizure disorder," she told Auburn, more the mother hen than ever, "and she has to have her medicine. When she gets upset and starts fidgeting like that—"

"Where's her medicine?"

"Out in the car."

"Here in the parking garage?" Auburn needed some fresh air. "Come on, I'll walk out with you. It shouldn't be too much longer, but our investigation isn't quite finished."

He found Bystrom and told him why he and the Kendalls would be absent for a few minutes. They took the stairs to the main level, where most of the lights were off and salesclerks were puttering idly behind counters or chatting in groups. A few people outside on the sidewalk stood peering in with noses pressed to the windows, their eyes shaded with cupped hands against the straggling noonday light.

Once out of the building, they had to go back up two flights of stairs to get to the level where Mrs. Kendall's car was parked. Colleen ran on ahead, stomping in shallow puddles.

"Stop that, Colleen. Those aren't your gym shoes."

It soon became evident that Mrs. Kendall had more than one reason for wanting to get out of the building. As soon as they hit the outside air she had a cigarette in her mouth.

If the walk had been shorter, Auburn might not have gotten around to saying anything. But since the car was nearly at the other end of the garage, he couldn't keep silent. "Ma'am," he said, "I know it's none of my business, but cigarettes kill a lot more people than bullets—or knives. That little girl of yours is going to be needing you for a lot of years yet. If you can't stop smoking for the sake of your own health and future, think about hers."

"Oh, I know," said Mrs. Kendall, nodding and blinking in a fog of smoke. "I'm quitting. This is the first one I've had all day."

Colleen swallowed a spoonful of her medicine while standing next to the car, made a face, and pranced back toward the building.

As soon as the Kendalls were in the conference room again, the stream of staff members past the observation window began. Lieu-

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tenant Dunbar stationed himself next to the glass, prepared to record the impressions of the employees as, one at a time, they were shown Stiggle's driver's license and then entered the room and observed the five people eating lunch on the other side.

While this was going on, Auburn slipped down to the coffee shop for a quick lunch himself, but found that the serving staff were all marching in Dunbar's parade. So he went up to the fourth floor and patronized the machines. As he was finishing his meal, he got a call on his cell phone. Records had some preliminary results for him on background checks. The usual sources revealed nothing to the discredit of the Kendalls, Herbert Sharp of Pittsburgh, or the dead man, Ron Stiggle. But Joseph Damson had two convictions for theft in another city some years back, and the Social Security Administration had never issued a number to anyone named Hannelore Ottilie Strumpf. The address Ms. Strumpf had given was actually that of a Mr. and Mrs. Donald Chanicott.

Auburn thought that over while he finished his drink, taking his time because he knew how slowly and painstakingly Lieutenant Dunbar worked. When he finally got back to the office suite, the parade was over. He found Dunbar, Wales, and Bystrom in the empty office discussing the results of the exercise over lunch.

Several of the staff had recognized "that German woman" as a difficult customer—demanding, impatient, rude—and virtually all of them knew that Damson was a plain-clothes detective from the Spahn agency. One clerk remembered that Colleen Kendall had had a seizure in her department about four months earlier. Otherwise, nothing. Nobody recognized Stiggle from the photo on his driver's license.

Auburn reported the outcome of the background check on the German woman. "Didn't anybody think to look at some ID on these people?" asked Dunbar.

"Apparently not. The first officers on the scene just asked for names and addresses—"

"And I'll bet they even said 'please' and 'thank you.' Well, we know better than to try getting anything out of the immigration authorities on a Saturday afternoon. Cy, why don't you and Georgie get that woman back in here and see what kind of ID she can produce? Bystrom and I are going upstairs to look at the scene of the theft."

When Wales brought her back to the interview room, Ms. Strumpf seemed to assume that she was about to be released. "Not just yet," Auburn told her. "Some of the information you gave us earlier doesn't quite match up with the facts."

The effect of this announcement was anything but what Auburn expected. Ms. Strumpf broke out in a broad smile and let her shoulders drop like a soldier on parade who has been given the order "At ease."

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"An error of judgment on my part," she said, now with barely a trace of an accent. "I'm Lori Chanicott. I still use my maiden name in business, though."

"What sort of business?"

The dimples deepened. "Sales and service assessment. I'm what people call a mystery shopper." She put on a pair of glasses, opened her purse, and handed Auburn a business card and her driver's license. "We have a contract with Zwelfinger's, but nobody here, not even Mr. Zwelfinger himself, knows who I am. And I hope you're not going to change that."

"Probably not." He handed the driver's license to Wales, who passed it back to Mrs. Chanicott. "Did you want to add anything to what you said earlier? Or subtract anything?"

"No. I really didn't see much of what happened in that elevator, because I don't usually wear my glasses when I'm working. Being slightly nearsighted helps to give the impression of being slightly loony. Am I free to leave now?"

"Not quite. The lieutenant in charge of the investigation may want to ask you a few more questions before you go."

Out in the corridor, Dollinger was talking to a worker in a gray coverall who was holding a dark green checked raincoat, a matching hat, and a pair of glasses.

"Take a look at this stuff, Sergeant," said Dollinger. "This gentleman was emptying the trash in the men's room up on five just now and he found this coat and hat shoved down in the wastepaper container. The glasses were in the coat pocket."

Neither the coat nor the hat appeared to be brand-new. At least, they didn't have price tags on them. The glasses had wire rims and plain glass lenses that didn't show even a partial fingerprint. It seemed highly probable that these were all elements of a disguise discarded by the jewel thief after he left the jewelry department.

When Dunbar and Bystrom reappeared, they had the plastic box containing the fake Bellarte ensemble, wrapped in tissue paper. Through the frosted, opalescent plastic, the fake pieces looked pretty plausible to Auburn. Since Sergeant Kestrel, the evidence technician, had already left the store, Dunbar assigned Wales to take the jewel box with her when she went back to headquarters.

Auburn reported the results of his second interview with "the German woman" and showed Dunbar the hat and coat and glasses.

Dunbar examined them carefully. "Things are coming together, aren't they?" he said. "But I'm still not sure if we've got one criminal walking around loose, or two. Let's get Damson in the office and shake him up a little. Bystrom, go back up to the jewelry department and bring down that clerk, Hedy. Have her walk in on us by accident and take another look at Damson."

By the time he was summoned for a second interview, Damson

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seemed to have given up expecting any special favors. Having had lunch on the house, he was now apparently just hoping to get home in time for dinner. When he found himself confronted by both Auburn and Dunbar, whom he hadn't met before, he gave the first indication of some uneasiness about his own welfare.

"We have a couple more questions for you, Mr. Damson," said Dunbar. "Were you aware that Stiggle was also working undercover as a store detective?"

"Working for who? He was never one of our guys."

"I didn't say he was."

"Like I told the other officer, I never saw the man before in my life. Never laid eyes on him till he fell down dead in that elevator."

"Does Gene Spahn know you've had two convictions for theft?"

Damson flinched as if somebody had stomped on his toes. "No, sir."

"I didn't think so. Try this coat on. Ever see it before?"

"No, sir."

"Seems to fit you pretty well. Put on these glasses, will you? Okay, now the hat."

Damson would have liked to object to this rigmarole, but the mention of his prior convictions had taken all the fight out of him.

While they were waiting for the jewelry clerk to appear, Auburn remembered something. "This morning," he said to Damson, "when you were telling me what happened in the elevator, you said you were standing just inside the door 'with eyes front.' That's a military expression, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you been in the service?"

"Yes, sir."

"What branch?"

"Thirty-fourth Tactical Infantry Division. Discharged as a Sergeant First Class after Operation Desert Storm."

The door of the office opened suddenly and Hedy Wein bustled in, manifested surprise and confusion, and bustled out again with a murmured apology.

Dunbar helped Damson off with the coat. "I think a trip to headquarters is in order about now, Mr. Damson," he said.

Damson looked from Dunbar to Auburn and back again in mounting alarm. "What did I say? Hey, I was just a kid when I ripped off those TVs. What's the charge here?"

"No charges yet. As of now we're just taking you into custody as a material witness. You can call a lawyer from headquarters if you think you need one."

Ms. Wein, consulted in private by Dunbar and Auburn, thought Damson now looked pretty much like one of the three men to whom she'd shown the Bellarte set that morning, but she couldn't be sure. And then, as Dunbar pointed out, the pattern of the coat

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and hat and the design of the glasses were so conspicuous that they caught the eye and distracted it from the details of the human figure underneath.

Wales and Dollinger took Damson to Dollinger's cruiser while Dunbar went to the conference room and formally released the other witnesses. Auburn walked out to the parking garage at the same time as Herbert Sharp.

"So the guard did it, huh?" asked Sharp. "What was it, some kind of a personal thing between the two of them?"

Auburn preserved a discreet silence.

"I know, you can't talk. Well, anyway, I didn't kill the guy. And I don't think that little girl did, either. But she sure is weird. I asked her where she went to school and she just gave me a glassy stare—like I had a deer in my headlights."

"I had the same experience," said Auburn. "But don't you think she's just shy?"

"Maybe shy a couple million brain cells."

"You could be right. Her mom said she's got a seizure disorder."

Sharp's car, or rather his sister's, was parked on the street level of the garage. "I still can't believe it all happened that close to me," he said, "and I didn't even know what was going on." He got into the car, backed out of the parking space, and headed for the cashier's booth.

Auburn, moving on toward the stairs, stopped suddenly in his tracks, swung back, and watched helplessly as Sharp's car rolled out onto the street and was immediately lost in traffic. For another instant he stood there, cursing himself for his stupidity, and then he whipped out his cell phone to call the Bureau of Motor Vehicles while he started back up the stairs at a run. By the time he reached the spot where Mrs. Kendall's car had been parked, it was gone.

On his way back into the store, Auburn foresaw further discussion with superiors on the issue of demanding proof of identity from persons detained at the scene of a murder. Lieutenant Dunbar had already left the store, but he found Bystrom outside the elevators, talking to the guard who had let him in that morning.

"How soon did you get here this morning after the call came in?" he asked Bystrom.

"Two, three minutes. Dollinger and I were just a couple of blocks west."

"Where were the people from the elevator when you got here?"

Bystrom exchanged glances with the guard. "They were all right over there by the door to the stairway, weren't they, Frank?"

"That's where we decided to keep them till you got here."

"Well, where did Sharp wash his hands?" asked Auburn. "He said he got Stiggle's blood all over him as he let the body down to the floor."

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Frank nodded toward the restrooms opposite the elevator. "He went in there. We figured it was okay, since there's no window he could slip out through."

It took Auburn twelve minutes to find the stolen jewelry, wrapped in paper towels and tightly wedged under the stainless-steel rim of a mop sink in an unlocked janitor's closet adjacent to the men's restroom. He went straight to Zwelfinger's office and, after consulting with the store owner, used the phone on his desk to call Dunbar at headquarters.

Sunday dawned bright but cool. Auburn noted with grim satisfaction that the coverage of the case in the morning paper was worded exactly as he would have wished: "Police are stymied in the case of a local man who was found dead late yesterday morning at Zwelfinger's Department Store. The body of Ronald Stiggle, 39, was discovered lying in an elevator in a pool of his own blood. The killer apparently walked out past store security personnel and has thus far eluded the efforts of authorities. In addition to being still at large, he is believed to have made off with jewelry valued at nearly $20,000. Police declined to identify a man they held briefly for questioning but released late yesterday."

Zwelfinger's was due to reopen at noon. Auburn was at the store before eleven, conferring with the owner, who had broken a lifelong habit and come in to work on Sunday.

When, promptly at twelve, the doors were unlocked, clusters of shoppers who had been waiting outside on the sidewalks irrupted and dispersed in all directions. If any of them had come looking for bloodstains in the elevator or other tokens of recent horrors, they were disappointed.

Around half-past twelve a man entered the store by one of the doors facing DeWire Street. His dark blue suit and leisurely manner suggested that he had just stopped in on his way home from church. With streaks of gray in his hair and a darker complexion, he was barely recognizable as the man who had called himself Herbert Sharp when questioned by the police the day before in connection with the murder in the elevator.

Without removing his hat or his heavily tinted glasses, he made his way unhurriedly down the main aisle past cosmetics, costume jewelry, cameras and small electronics, men's accessories, and budget leather goods. At length, seemingly by accident, he found himself opposite the first-floor restrooms and, still at the same deliberate pace, drifted into the men's room.

When he emerged, two or three minutes later, he found his progress blocked by Detective Sergeant Cyrus Auburn. "Jared Castle," said Auburn, speaking quietly so as not to attract the attention of nearby shoppers, "you're under arrest on charges of

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grand larceny and two counts of first-degree murder." As he was reciting the Miranda formula, Dollinger stepped out of the restroom and stood behind Castle.

Castle reacted with signs of annoyance rather than alarm. "Wait a minute, Officer. Back up here. That's not my name."

"Just stand still for a minute, Mr. Castle. The gentleman with his hand on your arm is Patrolman Dollinger. You and he had lunch together yesterday upstairs. He's going to see what you have in your pockets."

From the inside pocket of Castle's jacket, Dollinger extracted, almost as dexterously as a professional pickpocket would have, a bundle done up in paper toweling. Castle swept the nearby aisles with an anxious eye, as if looking for somebody.

"They're not here," Auburn told him. "They're already in custody, so you're on your own. The only person who's going to do you any good now is a lawyer."

On Monday afternoon Auburn visited Zwelfinger's to return the Bellarte ensemble to its rightful owner.

"The city prosecutor isn't going to pursue the shoplifting charge," he explained as Zwelfinger signed a receipt for the jewelry. "We've got enough on Castle to make the murder charge stick, and the Pittsburgh police have an equally strong case against him for a murder there."

"According to the morning paper," said Zwelfinger, "he's been working as an optical technician at Eyes on You out at Willoughby Mall."

"Correct. He apparently made up the fake jewelry there in the lab. He's been a professional thief all his life, but four years ago in Pittsburgh, sort of on the spur of the moment, he branched out into murder. He left town in a hurry, changed his name to Kendall, and set up business here."

He pointed to the jewelry, which lay in a plastic bag on Zwelfinger's desk. "Right after he pinched this stuff on Saturday and got rid of his disguise, your man Stiggle spotted him. Stiggle was from Pittsburgh, too. He may not have known that Castle had snatched the jewelry, but he recognized him as a man who was wanted for murder.

"Castle also recognized Stiggle. And although he probably didn't realize he was working security, when Stiggle started following him he knew his life was on the line. He picked up a knife in the cutlery department, got behind Stiggle in the elevator, and used a little trick he learned from his Uncle Sam when he was in the Special Forces."

"Seems like an utterly foolhardy thing to do."

"I agree. But professional criminals are usually people who can think fast in a crisis, and most of them have had plenty of practice in balancing one risk against another. Castle was a desperate man, and he took a crazy chance since the lighting was defective

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in the elevator and the other passengers were facing away from him. And, at that, he almost got away with it."

"And the woman with the kid—"

"Was his wife. The three of them worked as a team. He snatched the merchandise, but the other two were always hovering in the vicinity in case of trouble. If he was spotted, he'd slip the loot to one of them. If things really got tough, the kid would fake an epileptic seizure to distract the store staff and the bystanders long enough for him to get away. They screened him from the other passengers in the elevator while he was killing Stiggle, and the wife's story seemed to implicate Damson as the murderer. So did Castle's, of course.

"When Castle was questioned, he gave us the name of his brother-in-law in Pittsburgh, Herbert Sharp, never expecting that he'd be held while the investigation proceeded. He claimed he was just in town for the weekend and was using his sister's car. But the registration number on that car was only one digit different from the one on Mrs. Kendall's car. When that finally dawned on me, it was too late to stop him, but the Bureau of Motor Vehicles confirmed that both cars were registered to Mrs. Kendall.

"They didn't go home Saturday night—at least not to the address where they lived under the name of Kendall. They probably had an alternate rendezvous point in case of trouble. As you know, a couple of plain-clothes police officers nabbed the woman and the kid out on the sidewalk yesterday before they could get in and run interference for Castle."

"What'll happen to the little girl if they both go to jail?"

"She's in a foster home already. They weren't able to produce a birth certificate, so there's a chance she's not even their child—could have been kidnapped when she was a baby."

Zwelfinger scowled bleakly at the old-fashioned desk before him, at the sedately ticking clock on the wall, and then at Auburn. "Crooks!" he fumed. "They're everywhere! I know good and well there's somebody out there at this very moment slipping a lipstick they didn't pay for into their handbag, putting on a pair of my jeans under their own in a fitting room, switching price tags on sale items—"

"Well, sir, look on the bright side. You've got your jewelry back, your security people are in the clear, and you're going to be getting a lot of free advertising in the papers and on TV till the courts get finished with the Castles."

"Maybe, maybe," growled Zwelfinger. "But do you know what sticks in my craw? There were six people riding in that elevator yesterday, and only one of them was a bona fide customer."

Even if Auburn hadn't promised Hannelore Strumpf not to blow her cover, he wouldn't have had the heart to correct Zwelfinger's arithmetic. ●

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Cajun Dish Served Cold
by Cornelia Snider Yarrington

Uncle Maurice and Uncle Hervé,
Once chefs of some local renown,
Have exchanged not a word for a year to the day
Though they live in the very same town.
It started with Grandpère Luc's birthday, they say,
A potluck to help celebrate,
When Uncle Maurice and Uncle Hervé,
(Simultaneously fashionably late)
Made an entrance as grand as a sultan could wish,
Each bearing his spécialité.
And each with a flourish uncovered his dish
To reveal: Each had brought étouffée.

"A superior chef my young brother is not,"
The elder intoned with a sneer,
"Come, mes amis, eat my dish while it is hot.
Hervé may do better next year."
"Next year it's your dish we will try, au contraire,"
Proud Hervé was quick to retort.
"Your étouffée might do for piglets, mon frère,
But only as final resort!"
From each to the other, sharp insults were flung
As family withdrew from the fray.
From each wounded ego sour venom was wrung,
Forgotten each cold étouffée.

Till Grandpère Luc thundered out: "Silence! This fête
She is finished, I've lost appetite."
And holding both dishes up over his tête,
Flung them out to his hounds in the night.
And there, uneaten by dog or by cat,
The contents next morning still lay
By the stiffening corpse of a curious rat,
Who had sampled someone's étouffée.
Who knows now which brother deserves a release
From the cloud both live under today?
Hervé puts the blame on the elder Maurice,
And Maurice on the younger Hervé.

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A Glass of Water

by Brenda Joziatis

He is so thirsty. He has spent the last half-hour chewing on plaster, worrying it loose from a hole by the doorframe, a hole that has grown bigger with his persistent prying. His mother, intent on baking a chocolate cake, has not noticed, has been relieved at his silence. She is too inexperienced to realize how ominous silence can be.

His young parents are Polish, although born in this country, so English is their native language. Both work double shifts in the mills where bolts of khaki destined for soldiers' uniforms roll past like the murky river outside. During the week, they board Toby with a down-at-heels French-speaking family crowded into a grimy tenement on the flanks of Little Canada. Fridays, they come to take him home in their old Packard, usually to a meal of pork and beans, Campbell's, from a can. He prefers Therese's baked-in-the-oven beans, but these are acceptable and, best of all, quick. He is always hungry.

Saturdays, his father gets up for work as usual, but his mother stays home, sleeps late. She reads *Silver Screen,* gets reacquainted with Toby and the role of housewife-with-child. Sometimes, she lets him roll cans on the floor, tries to teach him his letters by pointing out words on the labels.

When this young woman with curly hair tells him, "Come to Mama," and holds out her arms, he does. It is not the word "Mama" that entices him, only the hope of a cookie or a slice of gummy white bread sprinkled with sugar. No matter what this open-armed stranger says, he knows his *maman* is the big-chested

An *EQMM* Department of First Stories author (8/03), Brenda Joziatis holds a master's degree in fiction from the University of New Hampshire, where she won the Richard Shea Award for one of her short stories. As she told *EQMM,* parts of this new work "actually happened to my deceased husband as a child, but he had much more merciful parents than poor Toby." We have another of her distinctive stories coming up soon. †

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woman they call Therese. Therese of the blue-checked apron and red chapped hands. Therese, who always has time to pick up a crying child for a quick hug, a comforting squeeze against her plump, yeasty breasts. He is one of many at her house, not even the youngest, that honor goes to the twins, Anton and Rosario, but he is secure in his place. He knows his needs will be answered, if not immediately, then soon, part of Therese's countless trips between woodstove, table, and pump.

There is no pump in the apartment where his parents live. It is confusing, but he has learned that water comes from brass faucets here. They are everywhere. In the kitchen. In the bathroom where there is a yellowing toilet and tub. (At Therese's, they still have a three-holer in the ell, a galvanized washtub for baths.) Even down in the spider-laden cellar, smelling of turnip and potato (a familiar, comforting odor), with its huge soapstone sinks where his mother soaks her sheets. He is not yet two, but already he has stopped wetting the bed. Already, he is trying to learn what pleases women, and a dry bed does. Both mamas praise him, call him clever, call him *darling* and *cher.*

So when he goes to the weekend mother and tugs her skirt, he thinks it will be a simple task to convey his thirst to her. *"L'eau?"* he says, looking up hopefully into her pretty pink face.

"Low?" she says back. Then, thinking he wants her to sing to him, she croons a lullaby in which "bye low" is a crucial phrase. It is lovely; he adores music. For a moment, he forgets his thirst and tries to chortle along to the familiar melody. But he soon remembers. *"L'eau,"* he says, more assertively this time. She is peeling potatoes, and has not yet washed the breakfast dishes. He is sure that the jelly jar with the red tulips that held his morning milk is still up on the counter. All she has to do is rinse it out and fill it from the faucet. At Therese's, his *maman* would have dipped water from the bucket that sat on the linoleum-covered table next to the stove. Or perhaps she would have gotten him fresh, first priming the pump, probably not even bothering to rinse the glass; lots of times his water had a milky film.

Here it is so easy. She just has to turn on the faucet.

But first she has to understand. *"L'eau,"* he repeats, and points upward where he's sure the jelly-jar glass sits.

His mother sighs and lifts him up to sit on the counter. "Be a good boy. Don't wiggle now," she cautions him.

He is impatient but feels he is getting closer to his goal. Across her flashing paring knife, he can see the glass and its red tulips. Maybe repetition will help. *"L'eau. L'eau!"* Louder this time and pointing again.

His mother just misses slicing his hand. She shrieks and lowers him to the floor. "Toby, I'm trying to get your father's supper. I can

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NOT play with you. Go on, now." She gives him a smack on his overalls and pushes him away from the sink.

He is outraged, doesn't understand why he has been swatted and pushed away. His little round face contorts, turns red, his mouth is parchment dry. He bursts into tears. *"L'eau! L'eau! L'eau!"* he insists, stamping his foot and pointing once again to the sink.

"What's the matter with the kid?" His father has arrived, setting his dome-top lunchbox on the counter. His father is a giant who stomps up the stairs, seems always angry. He talks constantly about something called The War, promises to show those sonuvabitches a thing or two.

"I don't know, he's been cranky for the last half-hour or so. First he wants me to sing, then he wants to sit on the counter, then he tries to grab my knife. I almost cut him by accident."

The big man crouches down, takes Toby by the shoulder, gives him a shake. "Now quitcha bellyaching. Your mother's busy. Can't you see that? She can't play with you all the time."

Toby looks at him, sees another chance to get his request understood. *"L'eau?"* he says, between sobs.

No luck. His father gives the tiny frame a second shake. "Stop it now. Right NOW. You hear me?" Then, standing, "Jesus, sometimes I wonder if the kid's mine. What'd I ever do to deserve a crybaby? Work all week and I come home to this?"

But Toby can't stop. He is so thirsty. Why are they punishing him? His body shudders. He tries to lick the tears from his cheeks, sure that any moisture would be a relief.

"Jesus H. Christ! Look at him now! He's licking the snot from his face!"

He is dragged out of the kitchen, his feet stumbling as he tries to keep up with the big man's strides. Then, up by one arm (he's sure it is going to come off), over the faded plush sofa, and into the corner between the sofa and the steam radiator. He can hear the faint admonitions of his mother—"Don't be too hard on him"—but she doesn't come to the rescue.

"There, by God, you stay there till supper. Enough to make a man sick."

Crouching, scooched down in the dusty corner, Toby continues to sob, softly. But now he has a different problem. *"L'toilette. L'toilette,"* he whimpers, but reluctant to bring his raging father any closer, doesn't dare raise his voice above a whisper. Soon, he can't hold back. He soils his pants.

When Toby gets lifted up for supper, a turd slips down his pant leg and out. Not noticing at first, his father turns and steps on it. "What the . . . ?"

The smell is unmistakable. The beating is brutal. His face, his legs, his back. His mother is screaming. *StopStopStop!* Someone,

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maybe the old lady in the next apartment, is pounding on the wall. *StopStopStop!*

After the first blow, Toby covers his head with his arms. Something snaps. His father flings him toward the couch, misses. Toby hits the radiator. Something cracks.

"Change the little bastard," his father mutters. "Put him to bed without his supper." His mother is kneeling, shielding him with her body, but it's too late. Her tears fall into Toby's open mouth like rain. But it is too late.

Therese and her tribe come to the wake. When Celeste, the three-year-old, raises her eyebrows and asks, *"L'eau?"* Therese goes to the sink, turns the faucet, and pours a glass of water. She can't understand why Toby's mother starts screaming again. Something about water and that's all he wanted. These Poles, they are so emotional. It's sad about the little one, a shame, but it's God's will. Therese will miss the little fella, the money too, of course, but maybe if his mother's lucky—before her husband's in jail for good—she can start another. ●

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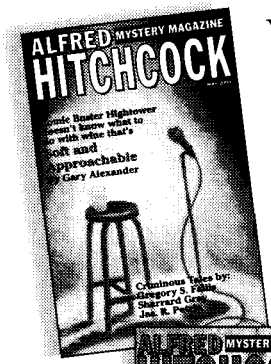

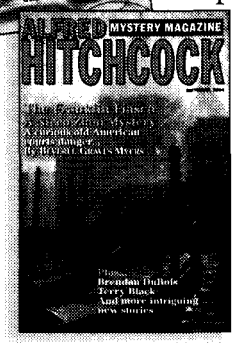

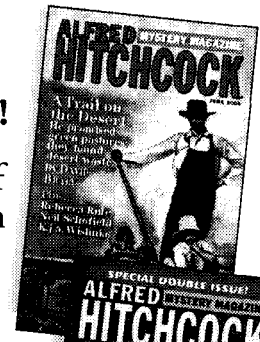

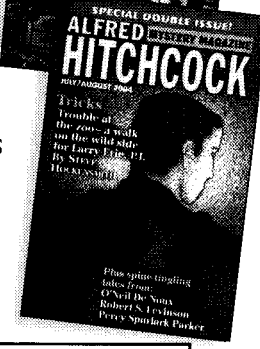

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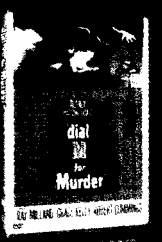

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